

Take My Hand (Take My Whole Life Too) by DarkShadows_EvilMind

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Genre: Age Difference, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst, Anxiety Attacks, Domestic Violence, Emotional Baggage, Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con, Losers Club (IT) Friendship, M/M, Moving In Together, Past Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Post-Canon, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Recovery, Richie Tozier Being a Dumbass, Sad Mike Wheeler, Soft Richie Tozier, Strangers to Lovers, Underage Drinking

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Summary:

It/Stranger Things AU where Richie is forty and Mike is eighteen. They meet at a comedy club bar where Richie is trying to drink away the memory of his friends who've died and where Mike is hiding from an abusive boyfriend and a heartbroken past.

Summary sucks, but the story is better. We've got angst, we've got fluff, we've got idiots in love. We've also got Richie struggling to flirt and that's gotta be a win in someone's book.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

For the sake of argument, let's say all of *Stranger Things* Verse has happened pre this story, and takes place in modern times. Mesh the universes!!

Mike toppled over into the bar, almost spilling onto the floor like he'd had one too many but catching himself just in time. The tired and underpaid bouncer seated on a high stool beside a tall table asked if he was alright, then tonelessly asked to see Mike's ID.

In his anxious haste, he almost took out the wrong one—the *real* one. But, just as he caught himself before collapsing onto the ground, he realized his blunder just in the nick of time. Instead of seeing Michael Wheeler, under twenty-one for another three years, the lax bouncer who wasn't paid enough to care as far as he was concerned (a quick peek with a flashlight at the right angle would've exposed the ID for the fake it was), read Thomas McDermott, age twenty-two.

Mike was trembling with nerves as the bouncer handed him back his ID, surprised as he always was when his baby face didn't get him caught. He thanked the man, then forced himself forward toward the bar. He had six dollars—hopefully enough for a beer at the comedy club bar. He'd never been here before, but he'd always wanted to go inside. It looked expensive and a lot of places had started trying to push craft beers only, leaving the cheapest drinks he could get upwards of six bucks a bottle.

"What can I get you, sunshine?" The bartender asked. She was an older lady with so many laugh lines on her face it almost looked cracked.

"Do you have a Bud—" Someone elbowed him in the back, cutting him off as he cried out in pain and crumpled a bit against the bar. Distantly, someone shouted a passive "sorry" and continued on without checking on him.

"Bunch of drunken idiots, am I right?" The bartender said, smiling at

him. “Bud Lite, you said?”

“Um... Yeah—that’s fine. Or... Or regular. I only have like...”

She doesn’t care, you stupid little idiot.

Mike shivered as he pulled his wad of scrunched up singles and coins. He organized them, dropping quarters onto the bar with deafening *clacks* each time. People around him were whooping with laughter and one drunken man was clapping his hands while watching the comedy show on the large flat screen over the bar. No one could hear his coins dropping, but Mike anticipated a blow to the back of his head for making such a ruckus. All the while, the bartender smiled at him.

“Budweiser’s just three fifty, sunshine.”

“O-oh. Um, the rest is for you then. A-A tip. Sorry.” He tried to smile for her and couldn’t. She was looking at him suspiciously and Mike was afraid she was about to ask for his ID. It wouldn’t fool her—he didn’t fool her and he knew it.

“Have you seen him before?” The bartender asked, instead of announcing him as a fraud and casting him out. She snatched up the money and put half in her till and half in the silver bucket with TIPS written on it in red marker.

“Seen him? Oh—The... The act? No. Must be good. He’s sold out.” Mike looked over his shoulder at the closed and guarded door to the auditorium part of the comedy club. Those with tickets could go in and have dinner. Those without could lounge around the bar and drink, watching the show for free on the many big screens around the room.

“He’s a bit raunchy, but that trash mouth sells the tickets. He’s sold out all three times he’s been here. Even his first time. Here you go, sunshine.” She set his beer in front of him, placed on a folded black napkin.

Mike thanked her and took his bottle in hand, keeping the napkin folded around the bottom to catch the perspiration. Immediately, he

started picking at the label—then caught himself, shuddered involuntarily, and stopped. He scanned the room, looking for a place to sit and then remembering that that wasn't such a good idea in his current condition. Instead, he shuffled through the crowd, feeling at ease the further away from the windows and doors he was.

Jordan wouldn't think to look for him here of all places. Jordan also hated crowds and loud noise and didn't like dirty jokes, so this comedian who had dropped four dick jokes in a row was definitely not the type Jordan would wander in to see. If he did decide to give the place a once over on his hunt for his wayward boyfriend, he would be repulsed by this comedian and leave without looking too hard.

At least, that was what Mike told himself as he found an out of the way place to stand. He was a little too close to one of the speakers, but the all-encompassing drawl of the comedian's voice, his small chuckles at his own jokes... It put him at ease.

Mike stared at the flat screen, watching the camera angles switch back and forth between close ups of the comedian's face, then his whole body as he paced around the stage—acting something out. Overacting, really. He was raunchy, just as the bartender had said, and goofy and dramatic. He made it easy to ignore the searing, aching pains roaring at Mike from seemingly every bone and muscle and joint in his body.

The comedian, Richie, was chuckling at his own punchline again and Mike smiled at him around the mouth of his Budweiser bottle. He was so goofy. His mannerisms, the voices he put on—every bit of him. For a moment, Mike forgot where he was, what he was doing—what he was running from.

The camera man had zoomed in on Richie's eyes and Mike found himself digging at the label of his bottle again. It was empty now and Mike was practically panting, his breaths coming quick and shuddery until he realized he was starting to have an anxiety attack. His pleasure had turned quick into fear and he dropped his eyes to the bottle label he'd shredded and the bits of it balled up on the floor.

He collapsed to his knees and started picking the little scraps up,

stuffing them into the mouth of his bottle. What the people around him must think—how crazy did he look, grappling around for scraps of paper by their shoes?

You can't do anything right. That's why you can't go out in public. You make such a fool of yourself every single time. Every single time!

Mike set his empty bottle on a distant corner of the bar since he couldn't find a waste bin. It was getting busier and busier in the bar and he closed his eyes, backing himself into the wall. The comedian was wrapping up his show and promising to shake hands with anyone willing to buy him a beer or lend him their wife. (His hotel's right across the street—no RSVP necessary! Just tell Genie at the front desk you're there for the orgy. She'll send you straight up.)

Mike wished he had cash for another beer, but had to settle for a free whiskey tumbler of ice water.

"You wanting to meet him, sunshine?" The bartender asked as she handed him his glass.

"Oh. I don't know. Probably not—I don't have money to get him a beer," he said, trying to smile for her—trying to joke. She pitied him and gave him a small chuckle.

"He usually hangs out way past close when he comes. He and Eric, the owner, they're good buddies. Hang out for a bit," she said, slapping the bar. "He'll meetcha, sunshine. You look like you could use some cheering up."

The ghost of his smile fell away, anxiety gnawing at him once more. Was it that obvious? That he was hurt? That he was hiding? That he wanted to meet the comedian with the gentle, deep blue eyes?

It must've been. Mike was never any good at keeping secrets. All of his were written clear as day on his flesh, on his cheeks which burned.

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Richie collapsed down into one of the empty seats at the bar. The rabid fan who had been barking happily at him for damned near two

hours had finally been asked to leave even though the bar was still open another hour—or was it two? Richie couldn't remember. It didn't really matter—Eric wouldn't let the bar close until Richie was unable to walk. It was their unspoken agreement.

The bar was mostly empty now save for a few regulars who had already gotten out their urges to meet him and were now talking amongst each other contentedly. A waitress he didn't remember calling for brought him a plate of food he didn't know he ordered. He'd been drunk since before the show started, making his set turn out horrible.

It was probably the worst he'd done since his amateur days. Eric disagreed, said it was all in his head. Maybe that was true... Richie wasn't a very good judge today.

No, today was the second anniversary of the day he and his friends killed It...and the day It killed Eddie. Ideally, he would be at home—in his bed, probably drunk if he could get up long enough to find a bottle—but his manager and booking agent weren't having it. He needed to “stay relevant.” He needed to go sell them tickets because the his manager's other big name just got slapped with a lawsuit for sexual harassment.

Richie, surprisingly, had somehow managed to avoid a scandal besides the one wrecked hotel room and the one dine and dash (which he paid for later, mind you, once the waitress who pissed him off wasn't working anymore).

He dug into his very late dinner, realizing it was exactly what he needed in contrast to the booze he'd been sucking down since ten in the morning. He could feel eyes on him as he dug into his chicken wings, and without looking up asked whoever it was, “Why are you staring at my cock like that? You tryna get down on it?” It was a stretch, but he was loaded and the show was over—what did he care? It was a little late to demand a refund.

“Oh—S-Sorry. Sorry. I'm sorry.” The panic in the voice, the youthfulness of it, had Richie lifting his head and actually paying attention. Or trying to—it was hard to see in the low light of the bar, even when he squinted through his sweat-smearred glasses.

Sitting two seats down from his was...was impossible.

Richie sat up straight in his seat, almost dropping one of his wings onto the floor but luckily clutching it to his chest and staining his black shirt with orange sauce. Good save.

Sitting just two seats away was a boy—definitely, no doubt about it, a teenage boy—with curly dark hair and fair skin smattered with freckles. Richie would know that face anywhere. It was *his* face—only twenty-some years younger. He was staring into the awkward, flushed face of himself at eighteen.

Immediately, he looked to the bartender—the voice of reason.

“Am I seeing...what the fuck I think I’m seeing?”

“He’s legal!” The bartender said, inadvertently verifying that the person was real. “Bobby checked him on the way in. He’s just got a baby face. I told him he could wait around to meetcha.”

Richie turned back to the boy who was slumping in on himself while somehow also appearing rigid in his seat. He almost expected the kid to look entirely different, like one of It’s creations. He thought he’d glance back and see some blond cheerleader or a stereotypical gaming nerd. But no, it was still Young Richie with no glasses on... Was it...It?

That had to be what he was, right? Except no... Because they’d *killed* It. It was dead. So who the fuck was this kid? And why did he look *just* like him? Did his parents have a whoopsi-baby and forget to mention it for eighteen years? Did he accidentally knock up some woman and this was fate, bringing him back with his long lost son? (Please no. Oh, God, please no.) Was it a rift in the space time continuum, presenting him with a younger version of himself with better eyesight? Or was this kid sitting in the bar, definitely underage, blind as a bat?

“What’s your name, kid?” Richie asked, trying to seem casual as this mindfuckery played out. He picked up a chicken wing and then forgot to take a bite of it.

"Mike," the boy said, looking at him sheepishly. He was staring at Richie with big, anxious eyes. His face was framed by a mess of dark curls, almost long enough to obscure the nasty, reddish bruise on the left side of his jawline.

Bullies, Richie thought. If this kid was anything like Richie—because, let's be honest here, he was definitely Richie despite calling himself 'Mike'—he definitely got it from the bullies.

"You really expect me to believe that?" Richie said, watching the boy closely. If he was It, eventually It was going to falter and expose the truth.

But instead of turning into some demented clown, the boy bit his lip and stared down at his empty tumbler as if ashamed.

"Sorry—Sorry, that was weird. My bad," Richie said, correcting himself when he saw that the bartender was now looking at him suspiciously. He was making an ass of himself. If the bartender could see this kid, then he was real. It had never presented itself and attacked in front of a crowd of strangers.

And they were in fucking Indiana. How the Hell would It get all the way to Indiana? Take a red eye? That'd be fuckin' hilarious. *It's on a Plane*, coming to theaters this spring.

Richie laughed at his own joke, realized no one else in the world would find it funny—even in of his childhood group of friends. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he could hear Stan saying "Beep-Beep, Richie," and wanted to cry. Instead, he took a bite of the chicken wing and tried to get some self control to come up through his haze of booze.

"Did you catch the show?" Richie asked, thinking that sounded a bit better—a bit more friendly.

"Some," the boy said, overeager. He seemed to flinch as soon as he moved on his bar stool, as if the very action of shifting his legs caused him pain. The bullies must've gotten him good... "I really liked it. You're—You're great. You're really funny."

“Well, I have to be, or they’ll kick me out.” Realizing he sounded like an asshole again, Richie added, “You want some of this? They gave me, like, forty wings. I think this suit must make me look fat.” He laughed at his own joke, the boy tried to politely decline, and the next thing Richie knew, he was sitting on the stool next to the boy and the plate of wings was between them. “So tell me,” Richie said, his mouth dangerously close to the boy’s ear while the bartender was making a mixed drink Richie had ordered for Mike. “How did you get in here? There’s no way you’re twenty-one.”

“I just...came in. I am. I know, I look like I’m twelve. Everybody tells me that.” Mike was blushing, but looked absolutely frightened. He was definitely not twenty-one, and he was definitely not It. He still looked way too damned much like Richie though. That, Richie didn’t think he could ask about, though.

And why would he want to? Why would he want to make it weird? What a way to ruin an evening—telling the cute, awkward boy that was blushing at him, “you know, you look just like me when I was a kid. Who knew I was so adorable? I mean, apart from my mom.” Yes, that was how you got a kid to get up and run for the door shouting “stranger danger” as he went.

Wait... Wait, what?

Richie surveyed the bar again, waiting for hidden camera men to pop out and announce he was the latest victim of *To Catch a Predator*.

For some reason, part of his brain tacked on “Incest Edition,” because this kid looked too damned much like him. Was there a chance they were related? Did he have a kid that was damn near one-hundred percent him with some one night stand back in the day? I would’ve been in his early twenties if the kid was eighteen...early college days. Shit... Not good, Richie. Not good.

“Thanks...for the drink,” Mike said, calling Richie back out of his thoughts as the colorful, tall cocktail was set on a napkin in front of the boy.

“Yeah, well... Yeah,” Richie looked down at his glass which should be empty, just in time to catch the bar tender swapping the empty

tumbler out with a full one.

“This one’s from Eric. It’s our top shelf scotch. Macallan.”

Richie stared at the glass in shock—a shot of that stuff alone could run a person up two-hundred bucks. He might’ve bought it once before, just to show off to some corporate suits—or some chick. He couldn’t remember.

“Is this how he’s payin’ me for the show?” Richie asked, picking up the tumbler. There was a smooth, polished stone inside the glass with his liquor—cooling it without diluting the fine scotch with water. “I like his style.”

The bartender laughed and then made her way around to some other guests.

“Do you wanna try it?” Richie asked, turning his eyes toward Mike who was sucking wing sauce off his fingers before blotting them on his cocktail napkin.

“What? Oh—No. No, I can’t... I don’t—no, thank you.”

“Ah, come on. Don’t be modest. Here. Just don’t spill it.” Richie set the glass down next to Mike’s cocktail, feeling as if the room was spinning around them. Maybe it was. Maybe the whole world was turning around and around without them ever having to leave this moment.

“Um... But it’s—I don’t think I’ll like it.” Mike said, fidgeting and then seeming to wince.

“Bullies?” Richie asked, realizing he hadn’t blinked in a while.

“What?”

“You kept, you know, tensing,” Richie said, shrugging and reaching for a drink that didn’t exist—remembering he’d *just* put it in front of Mike. Smooth, Trashmouth. Real smooth. “Was it bullies?”

“Oh...” Mike looked away from him far too quickly, the tumbler of fine scotch suddenly in his hand. He seemed to grasp in

compulsively, the way Richie had tried to a moment ago. His fingers tensed around it and for a moment Richie was afraid he was really about to see two-hundred dollars worth of scotch spatter on the floor along with shards of glass. But, then, Mike brought the tumbler to his lips and took the smallest of sips.

He cringed instantly and Richie busted out laughing, way too loud—way too distinctly—and Mike had set the glass back down in front of him. People were looking at them, Richie almost fell off his bar stool leaning back to look at them all.

“Kid can’t handle his liquor,” Richie said, voice ripping with laughter at a joke no one found funny. The few spectators he had all quickly turned away from him as if uncomfortable.

“That’s nasty!” Mike said, grabbing his cocktail instead and drinking three huge mouthfuls. Richie was a bit ashamed of the way he found himself watching the boy’s cheeks hollow, his Adam’s apple bob.

Did he always look at other dudes this way? Shit... He didn’t think so, but—fuck.

“How do you drink that stuff?” Mike asked, making Richie realize he had the scotch burning at his lips but hadn’t parted them to actually take a sip. He quickly did so, felt his mouth pull into a grimace, and set the glass down. “It’s so gross.”

“An acquired taste,” Richie said, chuckling even though nothing about what he said was funny to anyone besides himself. In his head he’d tacked on ‘like dating older men. Takes a time or two to get used to the taste.’ At least he hoped he’d said it in his head.

He was too fucking drunk for this shit.

2. Chapter 2

One beer, three cocktails, a sip of liquor he could never dream of being able to afford, and a glass of wine down. Mike was feeling *great*.

The club was closed. Everyone was gone except the bartender who had closed out Richie's tab and the owner of the club, Eric, who had shaken hands with Mike and gave him a voucher for free tickets to one of their upcoming shows. ("Even the special events! Any friend of Richie's is a friend of mine!")

They'd eaten all the chicken wings and now had a half-eaten platter of quesadillas, cheese sticks, and french fries between them.

Richie was talking, talking, talking—laughing at his own jokes just like he did on stage, his eyes constantly on Mike the way they had constantly been on the audience and the camera hours earlier. But this time there was no audience. It was him. Richie was paying attention to *him*.

His voice, though starting to slur a little bit—okay, a lot—from the alcohol he'd been sucking down, was so gentle and warm. He made Mike forget about the searing pain in his flesh. It was like something magic. When Richie talked, when he laughed especially, even the hateful voice in Mike's head quit talking.

They were sitting so close to each other, Richie having scooted his stool noisily over to him after the wings had been finished, saying "smooth, Trashmouth" as he did. Mike laughed at him, unable to hold it back. Richie had looked at him, smiling in his almost mysterious way, then began chuckling too. He'd leaned in then and ordered Mike a glass of wine—sweet wine, since dry was an "acquired taste." (That got Richie slapping the bar with his hand while toppling over laughing—some joke of his that Mike didn't understand but laughed at anyway.) Mike could feel his body heat where their arms were so close to touching.

Maybe Mike had swayed in his seat a bit in order to bump their shoulders together. Richie *definitely* bumped their shoulders and their

thighs together when he got up to use the restroom and when he came back.

Every now and then when Richie would get a little closer or say something that felt a little bit more intimate than it seemed on the surface. Those times, Mike would always look to the bartender that he knew was watching them, gauging her reaction to see if she saw what he was seeing. Sometimes she'd smile at him politely, other times she'd purse her lips curiously—then, after the vouchers had been given and the wine was practically gone, she offered to pack up their leftover food so they could take it with them—with *them!*—and winked.

“Shit—is it that time already?” Richie said, taking his phone out of his jacket pocket clumsily and clicking on the screen. It was nearing three in the morning. Hours had passed without Mike thinking of anything or anyone else besides Richie and his deep blue eyes.

Mike found himself staring at them, then tracing his way down to Richie's lips. He was talking, making some joke to the bartender who laughed as earnestly as ever.

Now's when he tells you it was nice chatting and he hopes to see you at the next show. Now he goes back to his hotel where there's a woman waiting for him. Someone who actually looks decent and isn't covered in —

“You down?”

“What?” Mike said, his eyes going wide as he realized he'd been spoken to and had missed it. Typically, that would make him anxious. Jordan hated so very much to repeat himself. But with Richie, Mike just stared at him in wonder.

“I said there's probably a bar in the hotel. You down?”

“Y-Your h-hotel?” Mike stammered, his heart hammering in his chest. He felt his lips trying to curl into a smile and actively fought it, trying not to look so eager. He was going to come off desperate. He was going to come off like some lame groupie. Was he really that pathetic he'd go weak in the knees for the first man to show him the smallest

bit of kindness?

Yeah, keep drinking. Then you can hit on him and he can beat your face in because he's not a fucking fag like you.

"Whoa... Shit, sorry. Sorry—Too strong. Came on too strong." Suddenly, Richie was pulling back from him, his previously so gentle and calm face now furrowed, his brow knit together as he signed his check and took a hundred dollar bill out of his wallet which he placed on the bar.

You ruin everything.

"I-I didn't hear you," Mike said, licking his lips anxiously.

Richie turned to look at him, brow still furrowed as if he were angry. Mike sank in on himself and reached for empty glass of wine, trying to drink the last bead of alcohol pooled in the bottom.

"Minibar—that's the way to do it," Richie said, nodding as his eyes slipped closed.

"Rich? You need help across the street?" The owner, Eric said, suddenly coming out from the back.

"Oof, officially getting the boot," Richie said, standing up woozily from his stool.

"Can't let you sleep in the booths again," Eric said, laughing as he clapped Richie on the back. They exchanged pleasantries, Richie perking up more and more as they talked.

"Here, sunshine. Get some water in ya," the bartender said, pushing him a glass full of water which he drank a lot faster than he should have. "You feel okay? Need me to call anyone?" She gave him a rather stern look that made Mike's chest clench. "You want me to give you a ride home?" She asked, quieter this time, so Richie wouldn't hear.

He felt his cheeks flushed and he glanced over at Richie and the club owner, the flush extending down his neck as he realized Richie was staring at *him* while talking to Eric. He winked and Mike nearly

melted out of his stool.

“I-I’m okay. Thanks,” he said, looking to the bartender who chuckled at him.

“Alright, sunshine. Let me just...give you this. Hang on.” She took a business card off the bar and wrote a phone number on the back which she slid to him.

Richie was watching the exchange and started chuckling before being forced to look Eric in the eyes as the man clapped him on the shoulder again.

“I won’t be going to bed until late anyways. If you need anything—a ride home, anything—just give me a call. Okay, sunshine?”

Mike tore his eyes away from Richie and looked down at the business card, then looked at the old woman who nodded at him—a strange look in her eyes. It wasn’t flirtation. It wasn’t intrigue—like she was trying to get dirt on Richie. At least, it didn’t seem so.

“Why?” Mike asked, not able to filter his thoughts enough to stop the question from slipping out or to expand on it more.

“We all get caught up in things sometimes, I suppose. It’d be nice to know there’s a way out if we get in over our heads, right?”

“Right,” Mike said, looking at the card—thinking this woman really didn’t know the half of it if she thought Richie could ever be a situation Mike would try to escape from—and then slipping it in his pocket. “Thanks. I’m—I’m really fine though. Thanks.”

“Alright, sunshine. You have a good night then. You take care of him, Richie! I’ll find you if you don’t!” She said as she made her way to the backroom, waving and smiling at Richie as she went.

“Take care, Rich. I’ll lock up behind you,” Eric was saying, guiding Richie toward the door. Mike almost forgot their leftovers on the bar as he instinctively followed them.

“Shit—it got cold!” Richie said, wrapping his arms around himself and shivering as if it were winter.

“You’re just too used to LA,” Mike attempted, smiling up at Richie from beside him on the sidewalk. They were similar in height, but Mike had acquired a habit of hunching in on himself—especially when out in the open.

“That I am—that I am,” Richie said, nodding. “Let’s see... Hotel! That’s where we’re going, right?”

“I-I think so,” Mike said, trying not to let the eagerness show in his voice. He really liked Richie in the lamplight outside the club. The yellow glow made his skin look rich and warm. It hid the color of his eyes, but they sparkled so much out here.

“My hotel?” Richie asked, sounding genuinely confused.

“Yes,” Mike said, laughing and then catching himself. Somewhere in the back of his mind he could hear Jordan screaming at him.

You think that’s funny!? You think that’s fucking funny you little piece of

“You’re...fuckin’ cute,” Richie said, seeming to catch himself just as the words slipped out. “Shit—did I say that out loud?” He started chuckling and bent forward with his hands on his knees, then stumbled as if he were truly about to roll on the floor, laughing his ass off. “I’ve got it bad, don’t I? Oh, fuck... I do. I fuckin’ do. Is that okay? Is that alright? I’m in show business—I gotta ask.” He laughed again, seeming to laugh harder than really necessary. “I don’t want you uncomfortable. The bartender—” He sucked in a shuddery breath that was desperate to be another hysterical peal of laughter. “—she definitely thinks you’re uncomfortable. That or she wants to fuck you!”

“I’m fine,” Mike said, looking around at the empty street, expecting someone to walk by or a cop to pull up and take them both in for public intoxication. How would that bartender feel if Mike spent his one phone call on her, asking her to bail them out?

The thought made him laugh which got Richie going again, and next thing Mike knew, Richie’s arm was around his shoulders and guiding him down the block and across the street to a chic hotel Mike

couldn't even dream of being able to afford. He bet a night at in a single bed room there would cost as much as a shot of that top shelf scotch.

The lobby was bright and shiny—marble and chrome and warm lighting. He gaped at it all the way to the gilded elevator where Richie fumbled around in his pockets for a room key he needed to use to get the elevator to climb to his floor.

“Club suite,” he said, by way of explanation.

Mike nodded like he knew what that meant, and let himself be led down the equally bright and glamorous hallway. There was so much space between the doors on this floor, it was almost like luxury apartments.

“Oh, shit! Fuckin’ passed it. What the fuck, Richie? Fuckin’ drunk motherfucker,” Richie said, voice way too loud for how quiet the hall was. Mike flinched a bit but was able to keep his good humor as Richie turned them around and guided them to the right door.

Apparently, a club suite meant an apartment with a huge bed, a small office, a living room with two couches and chairs, and a huge tub. Mike ran his hands over every surface while Richie spent an eternity in the bathroom. He touched the bedspread, the water glasses, the minibar, Richie’s luggage—his laptop, his cell phone.

The screen lit up when he touched it, a notification for an incoming text flashing on the screen.

BEV: How was your show? Hope you’re holding up OK. Call us when you...

The preview cut off the and the screen darkened, making Mike realize he probably shouldn’t be snooping. He moved on, pushing apart the curtains to look down at the dark street from what felt like miles up above the ground.

Jordan was out there somewhere... Probably back in their house by now, passed out or getting there. Waiting. Just waiting for Mike to come back home because he had nowhere else to go. Waiting to issue

his punishment—waiting to make him sorry.

Suddenly, warm arms were wrapped around Mike, pulling him back from the window—back against Richie’s warm chest.

It startled him, but instead of feeling fear, Mike just felt the butterflies well up in his stomach and he was giggling. He nestled back into the touch, feeling the rough scrape of Richie’s stubble on his cheek—the man’s chin resting on his shoulder.

“I have wanted to do this *all* night,” Richie said, his voice still slurred though his mouth smelled like cinnamon toothpaste instead of alcohol.

“Do what? Me?” Mike asked, grinning at his nearly crazed reflection in the window in front of him. What would Jordan do if he could see him now?

Nothing. He couldn’t do anything with Richie standing right here to protect him. Mike bet he would, too.

“That’s my line,” Richie said, chuckling right in Mike’s ear—sending shivers down his spine. “You know there’s a phone in the bathroom?”

“Oh?” Mike said, doubling over with laughter—or trying to. It was hard to go anywhere with how securely Richie was holding him.

“I think it’s so you can jerk one out in the tub with a sex line, but I ordered us room service.”

“Is that a good idea?” Mike asked, stumbling as Richie started pulling him further back into the room. He expected to be pushed onto the bed, the realization that things were moving way too quickly trying to seep into his booze-hazy brain, but instead Richie let him go and descended on their box of leftovers Mike had left beside Richie’s phone.

“Why not? I got some whiskey, some ginger ale—for tomorrow, or tonight. Fuck it. Mixer, right? Uh, wine... I think? I can’t remember. Fuck, I’m drunk.”

“Maybe—maybe cancel the room service then,” Mike said, licking his

lips.

Richie looked at him and smiled, giving him that look that made Mike go weak in the knees for no damned reason, then picked up and checked his phone while holding a cold cheese stick between his teeth.

He looked sad all of a sudden and stopped half way through composing a message—an answer to BEV, whoever that was—and shook his head before tossing his phone down onto his mattress.

“Everything alright?” Mike asked.

Richie stared at him, then grabbed the cheese stick in his mouth as if it were a cigar and pretended to puff on it.

“What, we got a problem here, gentlemen?” Richie said, putting on some mafioso accent that Mike giggling like an idiot. “I got a problem—see?”

“You’ve got all kinds of problems,” Mike said, trying to stifle his laughter as a genuine look of surprise crossed Richie’s face—like he was excited to have someone to play along with him instead of just listening to his jokes.

“Oh—we got ourselves a wiseguy here. You know what we do to wiseguys where I’m from, kid?” Richie asked, managing not to chuckle or break his mobster accent.

Mike’s voice was absolutely wrecked with laughter as he choked out, “Whack ‘em off?”

It wasn’t that funny—it really wasn’t! But Richie was drunk and found it hysterical. He ended up sprawled on the bed, convulsing with laughter, the cheese stick lost somewhere in the blankets or on the floor to be rediscovered later.

Room service delivered enough alcohol to keep a part of six going until mid-afternoon. Richie made himself a glass of whiskey and poured Mike another glass of wine which he sipped at in between puns—nonstop puns for the better part of half an hour until Richie finally hit the precipice of intoxication and started to act more

serious.

“Where are you from? Like, originally—or... Where did you come from?”

“I’m from here. Indiana. A place called Hawkins—you wouldn’t have heard of it. You?”

“Derry, Maine,” Richie said, his face suddenly looking haunted. His blue eyes almost looked rimmed with tears before he pushed his fingers under the lenses of his glasses to rub at them. “You wouldn’t have heard of it, either.”

“You really bring me all the way here to ask where I’m from?” Mike offered, scooting over to sit closer to Richie on the couch where they had ended up. Richie’s shirt was completely off and Mike had no memory of when that had happened. He cursed himself for missing it—or forgetting it.

“You really come over here just to fuck me?” Richie asked, his tone sounding just as skeptical as Mike’s.

“What do you want?” Mike asked, watching Richie’s eyes for any clue, any glimmer of deception or lust or that playfulness he was helplessly addicted to.

A smile split across Richie’s face that didn’t reach his eyes. He looked troubled as he took another long drink of whiskey that he really didn’t need. Mike thought this as he finished his glass of wine and poured another.

“I really fuckin’ like you,” Richie said, his words surprisingly stable for how inebriated he was. “I just... It’s so weird, kid. You look... Fuck, you look exactly like I used to. It’s weird—it’s really weird.”

“I—I what? What?” Mike had not been expecting any answer in particular, but he honestly didn’t expect that. “Narcissist, much!?” He laughed.

“I wish I had a picture... Like, if my friends saw you, they would think—Oh... Oh, no. I can’t even tell you what they’d think. *You’d* think I’m crazy.”

"I already know you're crazy," Mike said, smiling at him. He loved this. He loved that he could get a rise out of Richie and not have it shot down or deflected. Richie didn't get mad or irritated, he just smiled that warm, lazy smile that made Mike melt into the couch cushions.

"If you already think I'm crazy, can I just go ahead and ask something stupid?"

"Sure. Shoot." Mike said, his chest swelling with intrigue. What would he ask? What did he want to know? Mike, like a pathetic little school girl, hung on his every word.

"Your parents—they're...they're like, still together? Happy? Married? Right?"

"Yeah," Mike said, once again taken aback. Richie was definitely in favor of throwing out curve balls just as often as puns. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"You look like *me*," Richie said, enunciating every word. "I just—I like you, you're so damned cute and you're so fuckin' funny. I like you, but if you're my kid—"

"Ew! Gross! No! My mom's not a whore! She'd definitely never stoop low enough to sleep with *you*," Mike said, both repulsed and yet somehow humored. He could thank the wine for that, he was sure. Richie looked so uncertain and uncomfortable—like he really believed Mike was his long lost son.

"I just wanted to make sure—I know it's weird."

"*You're* weird! My parents have been married for like twenty years or something! I have an older sister—my mom's never been to Derry or LA!"

"Well that's good," Richie said, grabbing a bottle of ginger ale, knocking it over as soon as he got the cap off and spilling a good half of it onto the carpet. "Shit—fuck! I'm gonna get sued by this hotel. I swear." He was smiling again and Mike scooted a little closer to him, the wine he was sipping doing wonders for his short term memory.

“So you’ve got a sister... Is she hot?”

“Hotter than you,” Mike said.

“Not much contest there—sorry to say, kid.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m not the one with one foot in the grave.”

“Don’t you mean the cradle? Though I guess you could have your foot in the grave and your hand in the cradle—”

“Pedophile zombie? I think that should be title of your Halloween special.”

Richie smiled at him, so wide, his eyes scrunching up into humored slits. More drinks were knocked back, more wine and whiskey and ginger ale spilled onto the carpet and coffee table. The sun was starting to come up and it made Richie close the curtains—finally seeming to realize the hour, but only for a moment before the alcohol whisked the thought away.

He did, however, sink down onto the bed and pass Mike a look that told him, silently, “now’s your chance. Take it or leave it.”

Mike, unsteady on his feet and still giddy with wine, had just enough foresight to turn off the lamps around them before taking off his shirt and climbing onto the bed as well. His heart was pounding, his head spinning, and his very soul vying to leap from his chest as, finally, at long last, Richie’s mouth was pressed against his own.

Richie’s lips were hot, kind of dry, and his stubble scraped unforgiving at Mike’s upper lip, but he couldn’t get enough. Mike found his hand on the back of Richie’s neck, pulling him in and down. He didn’t realize he’d laid himself back against the pillows until he felt all of Richie’s body over top his own. There were kisses being trailed down his neck, then hands on his thighs, between his legs—when had he taken his pants off?

Mike half hated and half loved the way his mind faded in and out—getting lost in one pleasant feeling and waking up to the next. His head spun any time he closed his eyes, so mostly Mike just stared at the ceiling and clutched at whatever part of Richie he could reach in

order to stop himself from being thrown into the abyss.

Mike was shamelessly moaning into Richie's mouth as the other man stroked his cock at a far from gentle pace. He could feel Richie's erection pressing into the bend of his thigh, sliding along his overheated skin and coating it with pre-cum, and he wanted it—fuck, how he *wanted* it—but he couldn't reach and he couldn't focus. His hands, one digging into Richie's shoulder, the other tangled in his thick hair, felt as if they weighed twenty pounds each. If he let go of Richie, they would collapse onto the mattress as dead weight and he'd never be able to move them again.

Bright flashes of pleasure burst behind his eyes, making it so hard to actually keep them open and ward off the spins. Any time Richie would break off their kiss in order to gently nip or suckle on his throat, Mike was left a panting, whining mess. Richie's hands on him felt so good—so amazing.

He faded out again and came back crying out as two fingers worked roughly inside of him. Richie was moaning in his ear, the filthiest of dirty talk spewing from his mouth. Mike could only catch bits and pieces of it, but each praise of him, each sickeningly graphic compliment of his body—how it felt, how he looked, how he *sounded* 'moaning for Richie's cock'—pushed him that much closer to the edge.

Fragments of thoughts tried to trickle in between the explosions of pleasure.

What would Jordan say when he—

A hot tongue licking a stripe up his throat.

Was this really—

Teeth grazing his pulse point, threatening to break skin in the most lovely of ways.

One night stand with Richie—

Three, there were three fingers inside of him now and Mike really didn't think he could take much more.

One night stand? But he wanted more—

“More, yes more! *Yes, yes—fuck!*” Mike didn’t care that he was basically screaming. It didn’t matter. His mind had turned into a pleasant, hazy goo. Consequences? Witnesses? What did that matter when he had *this*?

Richie was kissing him again, cutting off his shrieks of pleasure as his body shuddered against Richie’s sweat-slick chest. Mike was only vaguely aware that Richie was still grinding into his thigh—barely conscious enough to think that maybe he ought to offer a hand.

A hand.

He could just hear Richie in his head saying, “Haha, get it?”

Mike managed one blown out, intoxicated laugh—muffled by Richie’s shoulder where he’d buried his face. He’d laughed, in bed, and didn’t even get slapped for it!

Mike wrapped his heavy arms even tighter around Richie’s shoulders and squeezed him as hard as he could—relishing being close, loving the sounds, the shrill hisses and low groans, he was getting out of the man. Being used by him for pleasure like this didn’t feel like getting used at all. Mike just wished they were doing more, he wished Richie had taken more—actually *taken* him.

He wanted to offer, to say it was really alright if Richie wanted to do more than dry hump his thigh, but all he could do was sigh and slur out “more, more” in a wrecked voice that didn’t even sound like his own.

That and Richie’s following laugh as he muttered, “you’re insatiable,” were the last things Mike remembered.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is hella long, but I could not find a way to split it down the middle. Enjoy!

Richie woke up to a splitting headache and someone knocking on the door. The room was still spinning as he got up, nearly falling over before he could even reach the door to open it—and once he did, he realized he was ass naked and had half a second to stop himself from opening the door all the way and revealing himself to the housekeeper like a bona fide perv.

“Can I help you?” Richie asked, his mouth feeling as it were full of cotton balls.

“You ready to check out?” The timid housekeeper said, her accent so thick Richie could barely understand her. “Is past ten o’clock. We need to clean rooms.”

“Uh... No. No, not even close.”

“No? You want second night?”

“Yes,” Richie said, nodding, even though that was not what he wanted or needed. If it made her go away, though, he’d do it and sort it out at the front desk later.

She nodded and pushed her cart off down to the next room, knocking on it softly as Richie closed the door and made his way into the bathroom. He filled the complimentary glass next to the sink with water four times before his thirst was finally somewhat quenched, then pissed for what felt like twenty minutes before he got into the shower to wash off the grime.

He was still piecing together the night before as he worked the cheap hotel-grade shampoo into his hair. The show was an absolute bust because he’d been an idiot and got drunk before he even started. He’d *told* his manager he didn’t want to do a show on *that day*. It was his

manager's fucking fault he'd bombed the whole night. How was he supposed to act normal when the only thing going through his head on repeat was the exact moment the life left his best friend's eyes? The exact moment some alien claw stabbed through his damned chest?

Hell, the only redeeming quality of the night before had been how drunk he'd managed to get. That and, of course, the kid who looked like he could be his clone—

Shit!

Richie turned off the shower before he'd even finished rinsing the soap from his body. He'd entirely forgotten about the kid—how the fuck did he forget about the kid?

Oh, shit! Oh, shit—on repeat as he grabbed a towel and wound it around his hips. He slapped his glasses back onto his face, cursing as the condensation of the bathroom clouded them as he stumbled out into the bedroom. The hotel suite was trashed with glasses and empty bottles of ginger ale, spilled liquor and clothes tossed this way and that. The couch cushions had been moved over by the dresser as if he'd tried to build a fort at some point. There was a Styrofoam container that had stale fries in it laying next to the end table with a fly crawling on it...

And then, nestled down in the pillows and blankets, was another body—still sound asleep. Richie stared, chest heaving as he tried to decide whether or not it was a good idea to start panicking. What did he *do* last night?

He couldn't remember...

There was the kid at the bar—they'd talked. Richie had talked to him and now there he was, passed out face down in his hotel room bed. Realizing the kid wasn't about to get up and run for the door, Richie went back into the bathroom to finish drying off. His towel was sticky with soap bubbles by the time he was done and he left it in an unsatisfying heap on the ground as he brushed his teeth and drank more water. He went back into the bedroom and cleaned up what he could of their clothes, unable to find one of his own socks.

When he found the kid's jeans, he felt around the pockets for a wallet, constantly taking glances at the bed to make sure the kid didn't wake up and see him snooping. He found two IDs rather quickly, a few discount cards, a coupon, and no cash.

One ID said Thomas McDermott, twenty-two, from Idaho. The other said Michael Wheeler, eighteen, from Indiana.

Richie was still off-put by how much the boy resembled him, but he was at least soothed somewhat by knowing he was at least past the age of consent—though just barely.

A memory flickered through his brain—he and Michael...No, *Mike* sitting on the couch together in the hotel, drunk. Something about a pedophile zombie. One foot in the grave, one in the cradle.

Richie shook his head and put the IDs back in the wallet and the wallet back into the pocket of Mike's jeans.

At least some of his memory was coming back. Maybe if he calmed the fuck down, the rest of it would too.

He cleaned up his clothes and put them back into his suitcase before pulling out fresh ones—only slightly mourning his lost sock. It had been one of his favorites. They were gray with iguanas and burgers on them. Two things that didn't go together in any way at all and made a great conversation starter whenever someone noticed them. (Not many people did.) Once dressed, he started cleaning up the room—putting couch cushions back where they belonged, throwing the stale fries into the waste basket beside the desk he never used. He cleaned up the glasses and bottles and put them on the tray on the coffee table, then folded up Mike's clothes and set them in a little pile at the foot of the bed.

Richie stared at what he could see of the kid sticking out from under the blankets and pillows—a tuft of dark hair and one pale hand and one pale foot. He was snoring softly and seemed alright, but Richie was struck with terror that the boy would wake up and scream rape—say Richie attacked him or coerced him. He was almost scared enough to just pack up and leave—run like a coward—but resisted the temptation.

He was tired of running. He'd spent his whole life, essentially, running away. He'd hooked up with men before, not often but a time or two at least, and had told himself it was out of desperation—needing to get laid when there weren't any women around to fit the bill. Now, looking down at the kid who was so clearly blacked out drunk, he realized that wasn't true.

There had been women at the show. There had been women trying to give him their number, trying to get him to buy them drinks, trying to ask what his room number was—and he had chosen to take home Mike instead.

Not knowing what else to do, Richie laid down on the bed on top of the blankets and stared at the boy next to him. He thought to check his phone, but decided against it. It would just be his manager bitching at him and the Losers Club texting him to see if he was alright. They were always doing that—thinking he was more depressed than he was.

Or maybe they were onto something. Maybe he didn't realize it himself.

Beside him, the boy was laying so still and calm—lost in a haze of alcohol he had no business being in at his age. Not that Richie hadn't done the same at eighteen, but he definitely hadn't gone back home with men over twice his age.

Lazily, Richie found himself moving the blankets a bit so he could stroke Mike's curly, messed up hair. It was soft and slightly greasy, and whenever his fingertips grazed the boy's scalp he would sigh in his sleep with pleasure.

Little flickers of the night before played behind Richie's eyes as they slipped closed, memories coming back foggy and distorted. Mike stared at him a lot when they were at the bar. He'd made it so obvious that he was interested, in one way or another, and somehow Richie had fallen into his web like an aimless fly. Mike had been so clearly enamored, just as enamored as Richie.

Yeah, he remembered it now—what he'd seen in Mike, besides himself.

Richie was glad he hadn't just walked out on him...

He shuffled closer on the bed and pressed a kiss to Mike's temple, earning a sleepy grumble but nothing more.

He lost track of the time, possibly snoozing for an hour or two before waking up to the kid rolling over onto his side—his back to Richie. Opening his eyes to see that pale expanse of skin marred with deep purple splotches was enough to snap Richie back to full consciousness in an instant.

Did he do that?

His mind and heart both raced as he shot up, staring in horror at the long purple stripes.

No—No, it couldn't possibly have been him. When would he have done that? *Why* would he have done that? How?

As he stared, Richie realized that some of the bruises were turning yellow with age, small rough scabs formed near the center of the marks. Slowly, Richie reached forward and snagged the edge of the blanket, pulling it gently away. He exposed more skin, more marks, that made his stomach clench. Mike had unmistakable cigarette burns on the arch of his left hip, bruises in the shapes of fingers around his wrist and his neck (along with a bright red hickey that Richie knew was from himself).

"What the fuck..." Richie hissed, pulling back as his eyes traced the bruises lower and lower. Every inch of him, from his face to his throat to his hips to his feet—every inch had bruises or cuts or burns. "Oh, fuck—what the fuck?" Sickened and yet entranced, Richie reached forward and pressed against one of the bruises on Mike's arm, just to see if it was real—hoping this was some scam and the makeup would wipe off on his thumb. Instead, the boy flinched and snapped awake with a hiss. "What the fuck happened to you?" Richie asked, staring at Mike who flailed in the blankets and nearly toppled off the bed in an attempt to get himself covered.

"N-Nothing—why? What?" He said, his voice rough and his words slurred.

“Does that hurt?” Richie asked dumbly, staring at the boy who was whipping his head back and forth a lot quicker than advised for someone with a raging hangover.

The boy was panting, peering around the room with wide, frightened eyes. One of his hands came up to press against the side of his head and then he started swallowing hard, his breaths getting sharper and sharper. Richie had all of ten seconds to grab the trashcan beside the desk, dump out the trash that was in it to make room, and then hold it Mike’s face so when he puked it didn’t get in the sheets. The whole time he was sick, Richie rubbed his shoulder gently, not sure if it was helping or making it worse.

He’d babysitted plenty of drunks in his day, but that didn’t make listening to someone spill their guts into a plastic trashcan any easier to stomach.

“There you go—yep. Get it out. You’re alright. You’re okay...”

Mike had started sobbing in between his retches, making Richie feel that much worse. It was his fault the kid was so sick. It was entirely, one hundred percent his fault. He was lucky Mike hadn’t gotten alcohol poisoning and died while he was blacked out.

Somewhere, during his mental barrage of self-hatred, Richie was yanked out of his thoughts by the boy sobbing out that he was sorry.

“I’m so sorry—Richie, I’m sorry!” Another choked off gag. “Sorry!”

“How about you just focus on expelling the demons, alright?” Richie said, going to rub Mike’s back and then catching himself just before he put his hand over the bruises. “No more talking,” he added when Mike tried to apologize again, only to vomit mid-sentence.

He was really lucky this kid hadn’t died last night...

When his stomach had finally emptied, Mike got shakily to his feet and stumbled off to the bathroom with the trashcan and a blanket wrapped repeatedly over his shoulders. While he showered and continued getting sick (or maybe he was just dry heaving at this point), Richie finally resolved to check his phone.

Beverly had texted him to ask about his show and asked him to call her to discuss their plans to meet up later in the week. Drunkenly, he'd composed half of a text message that he was thankful he hadn't managed to finish or send.

Hw doU think went?? Im stuck bing a performing monkey like nthing

Richie backspaced the message and tried again, composing something a little more levelheaded.

Bombed worse than Pearl Harbor. Got sympathy sex from a hot Asian chick :) Let the good times roll Dice emoji, dice emoji, heart.

While he waited for a reply, Richie straightened up the bed out of boredom and found half a cheese stick and his long lost sock bunched up toward the foot of the mattress. He was still smiling to himself for life's small miracles as he tucked the sock back into his suitcase when Mike opened the bathroom door, stepping cautiously out wrapped in a towel and the blanket.

"Feels better, doesn't it?" Richie said, trying to keep up his smile as he zipped his bag closed.

Mike was staring at him in unmistakable fear, clutching at the blanket over his shoulders while his big eyes gaped at Richie helplessly.

"Th-Thanks," Mike said, wiping a sopping wet lock of curls out of his face.

Weird response, but alright. Richie wasn't exactly functioning at one hundred percent either.

"Feeling better?" Richie tried instead.

"Uh... M-My clothes," the boy said, looking down at the floor.

"Oh. Yeah, I gave those away. Housekeeping's a big fan. I told her they were mine. She's probably gonna sell your pants on E-Bay and masturbate with your underwear for the next six years."

Somehow, the bad joke got Mike to laugh and he looked back up at

Richie with a sad, somewhat hopeful little smile. It was so weird, staring at a younger version of himself—covered in bruises, afraid to smile. Afraid to *laugh* even.

“They’re on the couch,” Richie said, gesturing to the neatly folded pile.

Mike’s eyes lit up and he hurried over to it, grabbing up the clothes and then dipping back into the bathroom to get dressed.

Now came the awkward part, Richie thought as Mike crept back out—cleaned and empty trashcan and blanket in tow. Now he said, “last night was fun, can I get your number? Maybe catch you next time I’m in town?” Only the words wouldn’t come as he watched Mike put the trash on the floor back into the trashcan. The kid was shivering and kept stealing glances at Richie like he thought he was about to be attacked—or maybe he was just waiting for the speech Richie was struggling to force out.

Why did he look *so much like him*!?

“Um... I-I’m really sorry about last night,” Mike said, before Richie could notice he’d been staring at the kid in silence.

“Shit—What? No. Why are *you* sorry? You’re the one who got boned by some old dude. *I’m* sorry,” Richie said, eyes fixed on the dark purple bruise on Mike’s jawline. “That’s a hell of a shiner you got.”

Instantly, Mike’s hand was on it, trying to hide it.

“Uh—yeah. Yeah, sorry.” He was fidgeting now, his other hand grasping at the back of the chair by the desk.

“Can I ask what happened?”

Mike looked at him with those huge eyes again. Richie felt utterly helpless under that gaze. He didn’t want to tell Mike to go. He wanted to hug him again and take him back into bed, hold him until both of their heads quit screaming at them for getting so drunk the night before. It wasn’t his business though. He was just a comedian and this kid was just...what, a groupie?

“Uh... That’s... Uh—Um... J-Jordan. That was...Jordan,” Mike said, eyes full of tears in an instant as he dropped his hand from the bruise on his face. The clothes he wore were high-collared, long and baggy, hiding his wrists and his throat and the bruises scattered across them. It had been going on for a while for his clothing choices to hide it all so perfectly.

“All of that?” Richie asked, a bitter fire starting in the pit of his stomach.

“Sorry,” Mike said, wiping at his cheek suddenly before hurrying across the room. He had grabbed up his shoes, Richie realized, and was trying to slip them on.

Let him go. It’s not your business, he thought to himself as he watched, frozen.

“Did you want him to do that?” Richie asked, coming to stand beside Mike who visibly flinched away from him as he struggled to tie his shoe.

“What?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know—did you like it? Like one of those kinky people they keep making movies about?”

“What?” Mike asked again, not at all sounding humored or embarrassed—like that was the case and he was ashamed to admit it to a stranger. No, he sounded anxious and fearful, and like he wanted Richie to drop it and stop asking him questions.

“Or is there just some creep beating up on you?” Richie asked.

“It’s—Neither. I don’t know. It’s nothing.”

“Your whole back is purple. I don’t think that’s nothing,” Richie said, getting a stern, “What do you care?” in response. “Uh... Right. Well, guess I’ll just go fuck myself then,” Richie said, sighing as he sank down on the couch, his head starting to throb to the point of nausea. “You got a phone number? Could call you the next time I come through town.” He hated saying it, but what else could he do? It wasn’t like he could just grab the kid and shake him into submission,

force him to spill his guts.

And what good would it do if he did? He had to leave. He had two missed calls from his manager and an angry text asking him if he was going to make his three o'clock flight.

"Don't have a phone," Mike mumbled, starting to tie his other shoe.

"You're eighteen and you don't have a *phone*?" Richie asked, looking at the boy with disappointment. "If you don't want to talk to me, you just have to say so. Sorry I came onto you. Sorry about all of it. Can we just agree to keep it off the internet? Or don't. I'm sure my publicist can find a way to make a fortune off it."

"I didn't say I didn't want to talk to you—I said I don't have a phone. Jordan won't let me have a phone. I don't have one," Mike said, looking at Richie with tearful eyes again. He looked like he expected to get kicked out of the room and didn't want to go. His eyes were pleading with Richie, but for what the older man didn't know.

"Jordan... The guy who beat the shit out of you? He your mom's boyfriend or something?"

"No, he's *my* boyfriend," Mike said, rubbing a hand over his mouth after he'd said it, as if ashamed he'd let the words slip.

"Your *boyfriend*? Kid, that's not a boyfriend—that's a psychopath."

"What do you care?" Mike asked again, wrapping his arms around himself as he straightened up, shuffling a little closer to the door with his head ducked.

"Look—This... This is weird. I'm hungover, you're hungover. I don't know you, you only know me from the television. Do you wanna get breakfast? Talk for a bit?"

"Breakfast?" The boy perked up the smallest bit as he wiped a few more stray tears off his cheeks.

"Yeah. You know, the meal where you eat plain cereal so you don't masturbate."

“What—ew! What are you talking about?”

“It’s a real thing. Look it up—Well, guess you can’t since you live in the Dark Ages. So, do you want some? Doesn’t have to be cereal. We can get pancakes. Waffles?”

“You don’t have to do that,” Mike said, trying to hide the fact that he was starting to smile.

“I want to,” Richie said, shrugging. “I like you. And, you know... I don’t wanna look like a loser eating breakfast all by myself.”

The boy’s face flushed dark red and he nodded quickly before stammering out a soft, “okay.”

He managed to keep Mike from sprinting away from him as he carried his luggage downstairs and haggled with the girl at the front desk—explaining he hadn’t meant he wanted an extra night when he’d said he did, he meant late check-out. The fee cost about as much as a room at a regular motel and Richie made an off-hand joke to Mike that it almost cost more per night than him.

Mike busted out laughing but the woman at the check-out counter eyed him suspiciously and gave no further comment.

Richie guessed he’d be reading about that exchange on TMZ later. Whoops. Apparently teenage prostitute jokes were off limits. Who would’ve guessed?

(())

Mike couldn’t believe his luck—and maybe he would’ve been more open with his excitement if his whole body didn’t hurt like he’d been run over by a truck—but he was at breakfast, sitting across the table from Richie Tozier, apparently a well-known celebrity outside the comedy club too. Two people had come by for autographs before Richie had even gotten to take a sip of his coffee, both eyeing Mike the whole time Richie signed their napkins.

To the first person, Richie said he had no idea who Mike was—that he’d kidnapped him from Wal-Mart because it was embarrassing to eat alone. The second person, who Richie didn’t seem to like very

much, was told Mike was his contribution to a human cloning project.

Richie had gotten himself a meat stuffed omelet—the omelet's not the only thing meat stuffed, am I right?—and Mike was happily digging in to a stack of waffles drowned in more syrup than one could ever possibly need. Every now and then, Mike would look up from his plate to catch Richie watching him. Whenever he did, Richie would smile at him—a look a little more playful and lively than the ones he'd given Mike the night before—and then refocus on his omelet.

“So, I’m gonna be straight forward for a minute,” Richie said before quickly adding on, “Nothing bad. Really. I promise,” when Mike dropped his fork onto the table with a loud clatter on accident.

“Okay...”

“I—I was really trashed last night. I only remember like...a third of it.”

“Oh,” Mike said, trying to keep eating so Richie wouldn’t realize how nervous that statement made him.

“Good things! All good things, really. You—you were fuckin’ *hot* by the way,” he said, leaning forward and whispering as if the empty booths around them were packed full. “Hot.”

“Because you’re a narcissist and I look like you,” Mike said, trying to make a joke though his tone just came out bitter.

“Okay, no—that part creeps me out. It’s why I look you in the eye all the time. Different,” he said, gesturing between them and pointing at his eyes. “Yours are brown. And I’m fuckin’ blind.”

“So what don’t you remember?” Mike asked.

“Don’t know—can’t remember,” Richie said, waiting for Mike to meet his gaze and acknowledge his ridiculously charming smile before continuing. He had a stupid way of getting under Mike’s skin and making him melt and it absolutely was not fair. Last night, the possibilities seemed limitless. Last night, it seemed like they could do anything. Now, all Mike could think about was the clock ticking by

the minutes until Richie finally said it was nice knowing him and it was time to catch his flight. “Uh—I wanted to make sure that I didn’t, you know, do anything or say anything to make you uncomfortable.”

“You mean besides right now?” Mike asked, setting his fork down again as his appetite diminished.

Idiot. You thought he actually wanted to take you out? He brought you here for damage control. Make sure you weren’t about to go accuse him of rape. He took you out so there’s witnesses, not because he likes you. Fucking idiot.

“Right... Look, I’m not going to pretend I know your life—I don’t. And I’m really not the one to give anyone advice on anything, but that guy you’re with, Jameson—”

“Jordan.”

“Johnathan, whatever—anyway, that guy has no right to be doing that shit to you, alright? I don’t care what he says, I don’t care what you did to make him mad—fuck all that noise. You don’t deserve that.”

“Sorry,” Mike said, not sure why that word kept being the first one to come out of his mouth.

“Sorry? No—I don’t want you to be sorry, I want... I want you to know that’s not okay. He’s beating you up and that’s not okay.”

“It’s fine,” Mike said.

“No. Mike, it’s not *okay*. You’re cute and you’re funny—you could have anybody. You can have literally anyone you want. Don’t settle for some jackass that beats you up.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not gonna meet anybody. I don’t go anywhere—not supposed to.” Mike took a long drink from his cup of soda, looking anywhere except at Richie. He’d heard this speech dozens of times—people telling him to get help, people telling him to move out. Move out and go where? The shelter? The street? He’d freeze to death in the winter or get beaten to death before it hit.

“Where are your parents?” Richie asked.

“They don’t want me,” he said, automatically—his brain already tuning out the conversation.

You’re just an embarrassment! How could they want you anywhere near them? The best thing that could ever happen to them, literally ever happen to them, is if you disappeared.

“They threw you out?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But you can’t explain? I’m sure they’d take you back in if they—”

“Well, you’re wrong. It’s Jordan or the street. What do you care?” Mike looked over his shoulder at the doors, wondering if he should run—then deciding he didn’t want to. It would just make a scene and Richie would think he was crazy. He looked back at Richie and shrugged his shoulders, realizing the man was watching him again—analyzing him—and not going to speak until Mike said something else. “Sorry.”

“Is there... You can tell me to go fuck myself, I don’t care, I’ve heard it plenty of times—but is there a reason you went back to my hotel last night? I mean, besides my stunning good looks and my perfectly intact hairline. You’ve got a boyfriend—who beats you up, I might add. Right? So why...why would you come back to bed with someone else? With me?”

“I liked you,” Mike said, looking at his plate.

“You like my show, my segment on—”

“I’ve never *seen* your show. I just liked *you*.”

“Really? Never?”

“I saw some last night, but... I don’t know. Jordan doesn’t like dirty jokes. He probably wouldn’t let me watch it if we’d heard of it,” Mike said, tapping his fingers on his cup anxiously.

“Really? You’ve really never watched my show?”

“You’re not that famous,” Mike said, daring to meet Richie’s eyes—shocked to see the man beaming at him instead of the scowl he’d expected. “What? What!?” He asked again when Richie continued just staring at him, looking giddy and pleased.

“I... Sorry, I had this whole idea in my head that you were some groupie—”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“—but you don’t even know who I am!”

“I saw you perform last night. I know who you are.”

“Damn right you did,” Richie said, winking and taking a bite of his omelet. Mike wished he could say the charm was wearing off, but sadly it was not. If anything, it was getting to him more than ever. They were in public now, and sober. In a way, that terrified him, but the way the other man was looking at him—the weird *adoration* in his eyes—it had Mike crumbling to pieces in all the best and worst ways.

Back home, Jordan was probably gearing up to beat him half to death. There was no getting out of this unscathed, because even if he lied about where he’d been and what he’d done, Jordan would punish him all the same.

He wanted this moment to go on forever. He wanted to wake up in the hotel room all over again—well, maybe without the vomiting and his hideous canvas of bruises on display for Richie.

Awful memories played behind his eyes as he stared at Richie—warm, smiling Richie who was joking with him and trying desperately to cheer him up.

“I won’t tell anyone... I know that’s... I know that’s why you took me out. So you could ask me not to talk about it—”

“I asked you to breakfast because I wanted to get breakfast with you. I’m a dude—I don’t do all that double meaning bullshit. And if Jonah

does, then he's even fuckin' weirder than I thought."

"Jordan."

"Why do you act like you care that I know his name? Where is he? Not with you—because you're with me, remember?"

Mike didn't know why, but the words made his chest clench. With him? With *Richie*? No... They were just out to breakfast together—like friends. Like colleagues.

"Listen... All jokes aside, I've got a friend—a girl, not that it matters—but she just left her husband, alright? Her really, really rich husband. Her business partner, even—because he'd been beating her up. They've been married for, fuck—I don't even fuckin' know—a long time. When I think of anyone putting hands on her, it makes me crazy. It makes me want to stick a *literal* ax in the back of that guy's head. And it's the same with you. I think of some creep whose name I'd really rather not know, putting hands on you, and I want to sink an ax into the back of his head."

"Well, please don't," Mike said, fidgeting in his seat. Before him, his waffles started looking soggy and ruined. He imagined the punishment for wasting food under Jordan's roof (a dozen blows to his back with the cane—at *least*) and then turned his eyes back to Richie.

"Do you really have no one else you can go to? No friends, no—"

"No. No one. Because no one wants to be friends with a faggot."

"Whoa—okay. Not true."

"Maybe not in California, but out here it is," Mike said. "I don't have anybody. I have Jordan, okay? And last night was great—last night was really fun and I like you, and you're *nice*, but that's all there is. I-I know you're just trying to help me, but... You can't. He's all I have and I shouldn't have..."

Cheated. The word he was looking for was "cheated." And he couldn't say it. Jordan constantly accused him of cheating—either because he looked at someone with too much longing or someone

outright hit on him. Any time he ran away to avoid a beating—well, postpone one at any rate—he was subjected to violence for affairs he'd never had. Now he'd gone and done it and proved everything Jordan ever said about him true.

And Richie really thought he'd go back to Jordan if he had another choice?

And now Mike was crying into his plate of soggy, inedible waffles. Great.

"You... You were really told that no one wanted to be your friend because—"

"We can't all be you," Mike said, not sure why he was snapping at the first person to show him kindness since he and Jordan became a couple.

"Kid, I didn't even know I liked dudes until, like, two years ago. Or—Or accept that I do? I don't fuckin' know. I'm still hungover. What I meant was that *sucks* that your friends would do that to you. I think that's what I was always afraid of as a kid... Turns out my friends didn't give a shit—and probably knew before I did, so there's that."

Mike sniffled and picked up his fork, forcing himself to take a bite of sodden, sugary waffles. He almost gagged as he swallowed it down.

"Did you...always know?" Richie asked him.

Mike shrugged. He didn't want to talk about Jordan, or even try considering leaving Jordan right now, but he didn't want to talk about his sexuality either. Richie, it seemed, was utterly shameless—not caring how taboo his questions, how invasive or absolutely *nerve wracking*.

"I liked this girl. We were together a while—she was really nice. El. But I guess it wasn't meant to be or... I don't know." He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't even want to *think* about it. Those years which had been, and probably always would be, the best and worst of his life. "There's no one else I really want but her, and we can't... She's the only girl I want, so... Yeah, there's that. Like you need more

of my sob story,” Mike said, wiping his nose on his napkin while Richie stared at him. “Sorry.”

When he looked up from his plate again after taking four more nauseating bites of waffles, Richie was texting someone with a stern expression on his face—like he was having an argument. When he set the phone down, his eyes met Mike’s and he smiled briefly, awkwardly, like he had something he wanted to say but couldn’t decide if he wanted to spit it out or not.

Mike wasn’t so sure he wanted to hear what Richie needed to say.

“So... This Jordan guy, you love him? Think he can get better?”

“No,” Mike answered, eyes falling back to his waffles.

“Just nowhere—”

“Nowhere else to go. Unless I kill myself.” He didn’t know why he said it or why it made Richie’s face start looking so haunted, but he regretted it. He was *sorry* he said it, but his tongue seemed to quit responding to his brain altogether and he couldn’t even stammer out an apology—the most natural word in his vocabulary.

“So what’s keeping you in Indiana?” Richie asked, looking at his empty plate where he was drawing something in the brownish grease with the prong of his fork.

“I live here,” Mike said. What did Richie expect him to do? Steal enough money from Jordan to get a bus pass and ride off into the sunset?

“Do you want something else to eat? You covered that in enough sugar to give yourself diabetes.”

“What? Oh—No. No, sorry. I’ll eat it. Sorry.” He tried to take another bite only to have Richie pull the plate away from him. Mike was ashamed to admit that he flinched as it happened, expecting the plate and its contents to be smashed into his face.

“I’ll get you new ones. What kind? Plain? Blueberry? What do you want?”

"I want my plate back," Mike said, feeling an odd panic well up in his chest that shouldn't be there over something as simple as waffles.

Despite his best efforts, about five minutes later he had a fresh stack of waffles in front of him that he was much more careful with. He still didn't have much of an appetite, but with Richie staring at him expectantly, he forced himself to take a few more bites. These ones, at least, didn't make him want to gag.

However tasty the meal was, and despite how honored he was that Richie—who had given a third autograph by this point—bought it for him, he still choked when, out of the blue, Richie said, "Come to LA."

"What?" Mike coughed, holding his napkin to his lips as he tried to clear bits of waffle from his windpipe.

"With me. Come to LA with me. You have nothing here... You said no one likes you, so...so come with me. Come to LA with me." He was looking at his plate, not at Mike, making his expression unreadable.

"You're insane," Mike said, voice still shaking as he took a drink of soda to clear his throat.

"Why? I like you. You seem to like me—"

"I don't *know* you. Creep."

"Okay. So stay here and...go back to that guy and he can wring your neck for that hickey I gave you."

Mike felt something cold drop into the pit of his stomach at the mention of the mark. Jordan would burn it off him—that's what he said any time he thought Mike had gotten a bruise or a cut from someone else. He'd light up a cigarette and burn it off. He didn't want the only mark of pleasure he'd gotten in probably his entire life burned off with a cigarette.

"All my stuff is here," Mike said, so quietly he was surprised Richie could hear him.

"Look, I'm not trying to brag or anything, but I am loaded. Okay? It's

not like helping you is gonna put me out—I can pay to ship your shit to my house. You got an antique dresser from 1805? Cool—I'll hire movers. I don't want you staying with that guy who's gonna do God knows what to you the moment you're out of my sight. You don't deserve it. I'm weird, and it's creepy—fine. I get that. But... I can't just walk away without trying. Without *doing* something. I don't want to see any more people I care about get hurt." He looked away from Mike, that haunted look in his deep blue eyes again as he sucked in a quick, pained breath. "I don't want you killing yourself because you think it's the only way to get away from that guy."

There was a tense moment where they stared at each other. Mike was searching his face for anything—any clue that showed Richie had any of Jordan's tendencies. He looked for tense muscles in his jaw, like he was clenching his teeth in rage, but Richie just kept nipping and sucking his bottom lip anxiously. Mike looked for hatred or that sick desire to possess—that obsessiveness that Jordan sometimes got when Mike spoke to anyone else—but Richie just looked *scared*.

Jordan had kind of looked that way too, though, when he'd spur of the moment asked Mike to move in—leave his parents and move in with him.

"I don't know you—I don't know anyone in LA," Mike said. It wasn't a real solution to anything. God, it felt like a dream—like he'd roll over and wake up alone in the hotel room.

It sounded so amazing, though... To keep this intrigue going—to pretend that Richie was his and he wasn't Jordan's anymore.

He couldn't just run away. Even if he did, Richie was bound to find out why Jordan beat Mike so often, so badly. He wasn't a good house guest; he wasn't good for anything. He had night terrors and bad memories and issues coping. Richie was a *comedian*. He was a celebrity. He didn't need bogged down with someone like him.

"So you'll meet people. Go to community college—get a job. If you come stay with me and you hate it and you want to come back, I'll pay for a ticket. Okay? Four hundred bucks, it's nothing to me. And if you don't want to stay with me, I'll get you a hotel or...or, shit, it's warm in LA. The streets would even be nicer if you feel like going it

on your own. Anywhere's better than here, kid."

"I don't know you," Mike repeated, feeling smaller by the second.

"Well, if this is any indicator, you already know I'm fucking crazy. But not enough to do something like that to you," Richie said, gesturing to Mike's body. "No one should be doing that to you."

"You don't want me in your house," Mike said, feeling tears in his eyes again.

He was going to roll over and wake up from this. It wasn't *real*. People didn't *do* this for other people—not without wanting something priceless in return.

"Who said anything about a house? I live in a dumpster next to LAX. You think they pay money for my shitty jokes?"

Mike buried his head in his hands, determined not to laugh at that.

"It's a nice dumpster. It's right next to one of those big cardboard recycling compactors. You could stay in there. Just make sure to get out in time if someone turns it on."

"Shut up, Richie."

"Come to LA," Richie said, sounding a little more certain this time—probably realizing that he was winning the argument.

"I'd have to get my stuff from Jordan. He won't let me go—"

"Men like him are cowards. He's not going to touch you if I'm there. I promise. Can I go with you? Get your stuff?"

Mike stared at him, his blue eyes making him hope just the slightest bit more that this was real. That he wasn't going to wake up to find himself aching and sick and alone. Or that, if it was real, he wouldn't end up on the streets in LA with Richie Tozier making him the punchline of some joke on the stage. He didn't think he could handle that.

"Anywhere's better than here, kid," Richie said, his voice sounding so

understanding...or maybe, Mike just wanted it to. Maybe he wanted to have faith and believe in something good again. "Will you come with me?"

Mike bit his lip and felt himself nod his head. "Okay."

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi, guys! Trigger warning for this chapter regarding domestic violence and character refusal to seek help, along with references (none explicit) to past non-con/sexual assault. One last oomf and then onto the road to recovery! It'll still be a tad bit bumpy. Thanks for reading and I hope you enjoy the update!

Richie's expectations were for a dirty apartment somewhere in the city, maybe with dogs barking in the street—snarling from the ends of too-long chains. He expected crumbling walls and chipping paint, missing hunks of siding. Instead, the modest house Mike had Richie pull his rental car up to was immaculate. Grass trimmed, hedges shaped, no peeling paint. The only thing missing was a white picket fence.

"This is it?" Richie asked, putting car in park and turning off the engine.

"Yeah," Mike said, sniffing. He'd been tearing up on and off the whole drive, trying to change Richie's mind about the whole thing at seemingly every red light and stop sign. "I can't do this... I'm sorry —"

"It's gonna be okay," Richie said, daring to place a hand on the boy's cheek—not missing the way he flinched away at first. He wiped away one of Mike's tears with his thumb, his heart seizing as the teardrop was almost immediately replaced with another.

"You really don't want to do this," Mike sobbed, his hand coming to cover Richie's—starting to pull it away from his face and then resigning just to hold it. He tried to back out again, tried apologizing and tried begging Richie just to drive away and leave him.

In the end, Richie was left standing on the porch while Mike snuck inside to get his things. The house was eerily quiet and dark, the windows covered to block out the afternoon sun. Mike froze in the

doorway, his whole body starting to shake as he whispered for Richie to just “wait for me here.” Richie was slightly alarmed when the door closed behind Mike and locked.

He had the sinking feeling that Mike was about to go inside and leave him there waiting until he took the hint that Mike wasn’t coming back out. His heart was pounding as he stared at the street, at the immaculate boards of the porch beneath his feet... He checked his phone and ignored his texts, all of his senses attuned to the house.

It was silent for so long, filled with nothing but the beating of Richie’s anxious heart, and then noise exploded as violently as a gunshot, and with just about as much warning.

He heard a muffled, “No! No, I’m sorry!” from Mike and then a slam, a scream, and shattering glass. The sound of it, the sound of the very real fear in his voice, set Richie on edge. Mike had apologized to him countless times for stupid things, but not once had he sounded so genuinely terrified as he did at that moment—pleading with Jordan.

Richie’s hand shot to the doorknob which he tested, knowing it was locked and shaking it anyway.

Jordan was bellowing in rage somewhere in the house, and more slamming followed his wrathful screams, chased by Mike’s shrill pleading.

“Mike!” Richie shouted, pounding on the door as hard as he could. “Mike, are you okay!? Open the door!”

“Oh, you brought him here!? You brought him *here*!? You little shit!” Jordan boomed.

“Leave him alone!” Richie shouted, punching the door one last time before a scream of pain from Mike spurred him to start kicking it, feeling the door frame start to give after the second blow.

Mike was screaming apologies, Jordan was hollering threats, but all Richie could process were the unmistakable, rhythmic sounds of something being brought down on Mike’s body with a dull, heavy thump. When the door finally flew open, the frame cracked and

shattered, Richie was faced with Mike in a shivering heap on the floor with Jordan looming over him. He had a wooden broomstick in his hand which he pointed in Richie's direction, and all Richie could think of was the fact that the brownish stains on the tan wood were blood—Mike's blood.

"I'm calling the cops! I'm calling the fucking cops! You're breaking and entering!" The man was screaming. He was older than Richie imagined—mid- to late-thirties—and tall. It would take nothing for him to overpower Mike, even without relying solely on fear as he seemed to do.

"Get the fuck away from him!" Richie shouted, storming across the front room.

"You are trespassing in my house!" Jordan boomed. He brandished the broomstick and then—instead of swinging it at Richie like he expected—brought it down on Mike's face and hand when he tried to shield himself from the blow.

Mike let out a squeal of pain, his no doubt broken hand retracted to his chest while a thick stream of blood burst from his cheek.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Richie screamed, staring at Jordan who was looking at Mike with sickened pleasure. It was all too obvious that he got off on what he was doing, that Richie's protests just added another layer to the scene as it played out for him.

"Do you see what you made me do!?" Jordan shouted, completely overpowering Mike's small, whimpered answer. Richie moved forward, planning to get between them—take a blow to the face himself if he had to—but suddenly Jordan's attention was on him again, his face red with hatred. "One more step, asshole, and he gets it in the teeth!" He meant it to—there was no mistaking the insane rage in his eyes—and it left Richie frozen in place, just out of reach of Mike and the black duffle bag near his head. "Good luck fucking around behind my back with no teeth in your goddamned head!"

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" Mike sobbed, still holding his injured hand to his chest. His face was a smear of red, his right cheek bleeding and

his left swollen and inflamed from being slapped—maybe punched.

“Shut it!” Jordan swished the broomstick just close enough to catch the tip of Mike’s nose—threatening to shatter it if he spoke out of turn again. When he raised his hands to shield himself, the broomstick was brought down on his shoulder hard enough that Mike was knocked completely onto the ground—curling into a ball to hide his face and hands.

“Do that again and I’m going to fucking kill you!” Richie shouted, trying to move forward only to freeze again as Jordan raised the broomstick over Mike’s back and brought it down hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs.

“Want another!?” Jordan shouted at Mike who couldn’t breathe to answer him. “You turn around and fucking leave or the next one’s going right here.” Jordan rammed the end of the broomstick into the back of Mike’s head, just hard enough to hurt. “I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doing, but he belongs to me.”

“Fuck you, asshole,” Richie said, regretting the words instantly as the man followed through on his threat, bringing the stick down on Mike’s skull.

“Stop! For fucks’ sake, you’re gonna kill him!” Richie stared helpless as Mike curled in on himself impossibly tighter, shivering while his injured hand gripped the back of his head where he’d been struck.

“Mind your own business. Turn around and leave.”

“Fuck you—and if you hit him again I’m calling the cops,” Richie snapped as soon as Jordan raised the broomstick again. “They won’t care about your fucking door when they see what you did to him.”

That, it seemed, got through because the broomstick ended up thrown across the room, crashing into a bookshelf. The noise of it caused Mike to scream, seeming to pull him the slightest bit out of his pain-induced stupor. He was still curled in on himself, still trembling and moaning out little noises of agony.

“Get away from him,” Richie said, stepping closer—watching

Jordan's feet as he did. When he moved, Jordan moved, as if they were playing some fucked up version of chess of with Mike bleeding in the middle of the board. He felt the odds were a little more in his favor now that Jordan wasn't armed.

"Mike's not going anywhere with you."

"Well, he's not fucking staying with you, asshole," Richie seethed.

Mike had started trying to crawl away, his definitely broken hand held curled against his chest. Blood dripped on the floorboards, mixed with his tears the line of drool from his bottom lip. He was a wreck—a mess—and Richie's heart ached just to look at him and yet Jordan seemed to delight in his suffering. He huffed out a laugh and tried to grab Mike by the back of his shirt.

Richie was the slightest bit faster and got between them, shoving Jordan back by his chest and then punching him in the jaw when he lunged forward in retaliation.

"Don't hurt him! Don't hurt him!" Mike sobbed, scrambling to get on his feet as Jordan's head cracked against the wall, leaving a dent.

"Mike, grab your bag," Richie said, his eyes staying locked on Jordan who was slowly recovering from the punch, hissing out curses as he clutched at his face.

Richie tried to put an arm around Mike, only to have the boy stumble away from him—as if expected Richie to start whaling on him as viciously as Jordan had. When their eyes met, there was nothing in them except fear. Mike was looking at Richie in absolute terror and none of the kind words Richie tried to utter cut through it.

"I can't," Mike whimpered. "I'm sorry—Please, please, Jordan, I'm sorry."

"See? He knows where he belongs," Jordan said, trying to reach out to stroke Mike's hair with the hand not clutching his bruising cheekbone.

Richie blocked him and pulled Mike back a step, cringing when the gesture nearly made Mike fall over.

“Richie, I can’t—I can’t,” he was saying, crying and trembling while Jordan got himself more composed.

“He doesn’t want you, asshole. Get lost.”

“Fuck you,” Richie said, grabbing Mike’s bag off the floor and putting it over his own shoulder. “Mike, you can do better than this guy. You *deserve* better. *You know that.* That’s why we’re leaving. Just like we talked about, right?”

Jordan started to say something manipulative about “always being there” for Mike and how he “clearly never deserved it.” Richie cut him off, asking how he thought pummeling the person he was supposed to protect with a broomstick could be considered “being there” for Mike. Mike was still between them, though Richie noticed he was leaning on Richie more than standing in front of him—having trouble standing up on his own. He almost collapsed, but when Richie tried to catch him, Jordan yanked the boy forward by his wrist, crashing him into his chest instead and caging him with an embrace.

“You know I don’t like having to do this to you—you know that,” Jordan huffed, his mouth next to Mike’s ear. He had Mike’s head pinned to his chest, making Richie fear he was about to use the boy’s unsteady feet and struggling to break his neck. “Why did you do this? Why would you do this to us?”

“Don’t listen to him! Mike...” What was he supposed to do now? He couldn’t punch the guy with him using Mike as a human shield. He couldn’t just yank Mike away from him and run.

If Mike didn’t say he wanted to go, if he didn’t ask Richie to take him—if he kept saying “I’m sorry, Jordan—so sorry,” over and over again—Richie would have to walk without him. He didn’t want to do that. He *couldn’t*. Jordan was going to kill him.

“Get upstairs to *our* room and wait for me,” Jordan said, after his barrage of insults and gaslighting left Mike hugging him back while he cried his little apologies.

It made Richie sick. He watched, feeling disappointed and almost

betrayed as Jordan let Mike go with a kiss on the cheek and Mike started to step away from them toward the stairwell around the corner.

Then their eyes met again.

Mike looked terrified, his eyes searching Richie's face while Jordan started chewing Richie out over the cost of the door. There was a desperation in his eyes—something that seemed to plead with Richie to make the next move for him. He didn't want to go upstairs; whatever that sick fuck was planning to do to him, Mike had an inkling and he was counting on Richie to get him out of it—even if he couldn't make the move himself. Richie tightened his fist around the strap of the duffle bag on his shoulder—a silent signal that Jordan didn't pick up on. Mike looked from Richie to the kicked-in door, then back to Richie.

“I said get upstairs!” Jordan shouted when he realized Mike had not moved any further. “You're making it worse on yourself—hey!”

Mike bolted for the door and Richie was only a step or two behind him. Mike fell off the porch steps and Richie was left scrambling to get him up—trying not to pull on him anywhere he was hurt, which proved difficult. Mike calling out in pain when Richie touched him drove a knife through the older man's heart, tearing at him even as he opened the car door and hurried Mike into the backseat.

Jordan was screaming at them from the porch, unwilling to step out into the street where he could be seen by the neighbors.

He called Mike every foul name under the sun, slinging insults even Richie wouldn't have been able to dream of.

“He'll crawl back to me! He *always* comes back to me! He knows where he belongs!” Jordan was still shouting as Richie started the car and peeled off down the street. His body was shaking so hard and he didn't realize he still had the duffle bag hooked to him until they'd gotten on the highway.

“Are you okay?” Richie asked, heart hammering in his chest as he tried to see Mike through the rear view mirror while also trying to

type “Urgent Care” into his phone’s GPS with trembling fingers. “Mike?”

The boy was crying too hard to properly answer him, shaking and holding onto his swollen hand while laying across the backseat.

“It’s gonna be okay. I’m gonna get you help—”

“Can’t,” Mike cried.

“Yes, we have to. Your hand is broken—your face is bleeding. We need to get you help.”

“C-Can’t aff—”

“It’s fine. Just—Just hang on. Okay? I’m going to get you help.”

It took twenty minutes to get to an Urgent Care, another thirty to be seen—though the receptionist was quick to give them a wad of paper towels to hold to Mike’s cheek and stick them in a back exam room to wait in privacy. Richie waited with him, a hand resting on Mike’s knee in an attempt to give comfort. It was almost frightening how calm Mike seemed, sitting in the chair waiting for the doctor to tend to him. His cheek was so swollen, his hand turning dark purple... Richie felt if their roles had been reversed, he’d be a sobbing mess still. But there was Mike, stoic and silent.

He was used to this, maybe. He was used to being beaten and left in pain—maybe not this badly, but perhaps to him it was all the same. Just another night Jordan took it too far.

(())

Mike had been beaten before. He’d been dragged out of a grocery store by his ear like a five-year-old before because Jordan thought he’d talked back. He’d been locked out of the house in nothing but his underwear in the dead of winter on full display for anyone who drove past to laugh at. He’d been stripped bare and caned before. He’d been held down and forced to have sex while repeating insults toward himself until Jordan deemed him genuinely sorry—genuinely broken. He’d had friends go missing, friends distance themselves from him—friends move away and leave him behind, promising to stay in

touch and then not bothering to try. He'd had the girl of his dreams, the love of his life, dump him...twice. Still, after all of that, he'd never been made to feel so small and so ashamed as he did now.

He'd let Richie smooth talk him into actually thinking he could leave Jordan unscathed—that Richie would protect him and he wouldn't end up hurt. And then he'd ended up with his face being smashed into a plate of dinner Jordan had apparently made for him the night before.

"I was sitting here, waiting for you, *trying* to apologize, and you were out getting fucked by someone else!?"

He got punched, he got smacked...he got beaten with the cane in front of Richie. Richie had to drag him out of the house... Richie had to see him at his lowest, and now he was being made to clean up Mike's mess. Urgent Cares weren't cheap... Getting his hand (the hand he knew better than to put in front of his face when Jordan wanted to hit him) X-Rayed wasn't about to be cheap and Mike could never dream of being able to pay him back...

Richie had been asked to leave the exam room the very instant the doctor took a glimpse of Mike and his battered face. Mike didn't want him to go—that was the sad part. His flesh was nothing but a massive canvas bearing the marks of his many failures and weaknesses, and now both Richie and this doctor knew it.

He should've just stayed home last night and taken his beating... He would've gotten a good dinner, maybe, and Richie would be on his flight back to LA.

Somewhere in another exam room, perhaps, another member of the staff was probably drilling Richie about how they knew each other and how Mike had ended up in this condition. Mike's doctor was determined to get the same information and with very little tact.

Did he know the man he came in with? Did the man he came in with hurt him? Who hurt him? How did he sustain these injuries? Were their firearms or weapons involved? Did he want to fill out a police report? He should really fill out a police report. Didn't he realize that he was helping no one except his abuser when he refused to make a

report.

Mike had heard it all before and his brain had mostly switched off by the time the doctor finished cleaning up his face and closing the wound with two butterfly bandages.

He was eighteen. They couldn't force him to do anything, no matter how they worded their statements in hopes of tripping him up and tricking him into speaking to the police. He would never incriminate Jordan. It was his own fault anyway. He was the one who went in alone. He was the one who moved into Jordan's house in the first place—he was the one who stayed after getting punched the first time. It was just like Jordan always told him...

People'll think you like it. I sure do. Of course you like it. Otherwise you wouldn't be such a good boy for me. You just stand there and take it, don't you? You know you're asking for it.

Mike refused and refused and refused to speak to police, made it clear he had no intentions of pressing charges—made it abundantly clear that Richie had nothing to do with it.

By the end of this mess, Mike was sure Richie would have nothing to do with *him*. He'd probably take him to the bus stop, hand him some money maybe, and say he was sorry but it just couldn't work out the way he'd wanted. Mike could just see it happening that way—his imagination tormenting him as a needle injected a numbing agent into his hand and the doctor set to work fixing it.

Richie would make a show of supporting him as they left the Urgent Care, then break the news to him in the car that as much as he liked Mike, it just wasn't possible. Their lifestyles wouldn't be compatible and he was sorry to have gotten Mike's hopes up...

Mike wondered if he called the bartender from the night before and asked her to pick him up, that she would.

The doctor was talking to him again, urging him to file a report, and then going on to list the prescriptions he was going to call in for him. Mike didn't even realize his hand had been wrapped in a cast until he lifted it to accept the piece of paper being handed to him.

While he was still staring at it, not able to understand the letters on the page or the words they formed, when Richie appeared next to him. The paper was plucked from his fingers and replaced with a cup of ice water.

“You don’t look half bad for a guy who walked into a door,” Richie said. Mike barely heard him and didn’t bother to smile for the joke. His mind was miles away, flickering between bad nights with Jordan and the amazing night he’d had with Richie.

Was it really worth it, the one night stand, to have his head hurting this much? To have his hand wrapped up in a cast? To have that doctor looking at him like the simple little fool he was?

“I told them I was running a Fight Club out of my hotel room and that you lost to a guy named T-Bone. They didn’t think it was funny.”

Mike tried to take a sip of the water but ended up coughing as soon as the cold drink hit his throat. Richie took the cup from him and gently rubbed his back through his convulsions.

Mike didn’t deserve his kindness... He wanted to lean away from the touch, but all he could do was sit there and take it. His head was spinning—he was so dizzy and so tired. Everything hurt...

“Okay, so... I kind of told them I’d convince you to go to the cops.”

“Not going,” Mike said.

“Had a feeling that’d be your answer...”

“Just leave me,” Mike whispered, staring at the floor—staring at anything that wasn’t Richie.

“Leave you? Damn, he hit your head hard,” Richie said, gently touching Mike’s shoulder.

How, even after all this, did something as small as Richie’s hand on his shoulder make him feel so warm?

“I can’t just leave you out here. You need sleep—you need drugs. You need a fuckton of TLC, that’s for sure. We’re talking *No Scrubs* all the

way to *Waterfalls*.”

“What’s *Waterfalls*?” Mike asked, letting his head come to rest against Richie’s shoulder and closing his eyes.

“You know,” Richie said before singing out some awful, out-of-tune lyrics. “No? What about...” More bad singing and then more references to things Mike thought he might’ve heard before, but really couldn’t say—especially not with his head feeling like scrambled eggs. The woman who had seen them to their exam room came back to explain the drugs Mike needed and what they were for, how to take them, what he should do to care for his hand.

Richie talked about billing, left the room for a minute, and then came back for Mike who was half asleep. It felt like his brain had completely shut down. He could hear people talking to him, could feel his mouth forming answers, but he didn’t know what was said or even where he was. Richie took him back out to the rental car and fastened him in to the passenger seat like he was an invalid who couldn’t do it for himself, then the next thing he knew they were at a grocery store pharmacy. Mike had to fumble with his wallet, trying to find his ID while his vision tunneled to the point he thought he might be about to faint.

He distinctly remembered Richie saying something like “should’ve taken you to the ER. They would’ve kept you” and became convinced the man was trying to get rid of him even more so than before.

Mike felt himself say something about a bus stop only to realize the car was stopped and they were back at the hotel.

“So, listen—I know you’re pretty out of it right now, but, try to listen, okay?”

“You want me to leave?” Mike offered, trying not to let the pain swelling in his chest turn into tears.

“Leave? What? No, listen—please. I talked to the people at the Urgent Care—”

“I’m not making a report. I don’t want to—I’m eighteen. I don’t have

to.”

“Mike, *please*. I’m asking you to listen. It’s not about that.” His tone sounded so disappointed and frustrated. How long would it be before that annoyance turned to a slap across the cheek? One week? A month tops? “I can’t get you on a plane like this. You look like shit—people are going to think it’s from me. Security is going to give us a headache... I talked to my manager—”

“I don’t... I don’t have to go with you,” Mike said, feeling his heart breaking more and more. Richie put him in this position—Richie was the one who had gotten his hopes up that everything would be fine, that they could run away together and be fine...

Who was he kidding? It wasn’t Richie’s fault. It was his own fault for being stupid enough to think that there wouldn’t be consequences for what they’d done. He didn’t get a happy ending with palm trees and the beach. He got left at a hotel for a couple of nights until Richie forgot to pay for the room and left him to be turned out to the streets.

“Mike, please... Just listen. I’m not leaving you. I’m not going to do that. We’re in this—we’re in this together, okay?” He wouldn’t go on until Mike nodded his head, the gesture making him unbearably woozy. “I talked to my manager. He got us train passes, okay? We can’t fly and I’m not taking the Greyhound. We’re going to catch the train from Chicago—”

“Chicago?” Mike echoed, the city sounding as foreign and exotic as Rome.

“—to LA. We’re gonna get picked up at the train station and we’ll be home. It’s gonna take a couple days.”

“Days?”

“Yes. Days. Is that okay? We leave tomorrow. I wanted to give you time to rest up and...and get some drugs in ya. Okay?”

Mike said “okay” back, simply because nothing he was hearing made sense. Then he was being hoisted out of the car and led back into the

hotel where Richie's manager had apparently taken care of their room situation—un-canceling the extension Richie had canceled that morning.

Mike found himself being laid down on the bed, pills being fed to him with a fresh glass of water. Richie was gone, then he was back... It was all an awful, confusing haze of fear and shame and agony.

"Can I change you out of your shirt? It's all covered in blood."

Mike didn't open his eyes as he answered with a small, "Yes."

He felt helpless, being stripped of his shirt while his body screamed any time it was moved. His shirt was taken and replaced with one that had to be Richie's. None of Mike's shirts were short sleeves. Then his shoes and socks were gone.

He's going to fuck you while you're strung out like this. It's all he wants.

Mike waited for it, but nothing else happened. He was covered with blankets and then Richie was curled up next to him, stroking his hair.

"You were so brave today. You know that? If I were you...I don't even know what I would've done. I don't think I could've stood up to that guy." Richie kept paying him compliments that Mike neither believed nor deserved, then kissed his cheek just beneath his cut and bruised cheek. "I'm so sorry I froze up on you. I should've knocked that fucker down the second I saw him hit you... Just stood there like an idiot while he did it again. I don't know how you're going to put up with me."

"Beggars can't be choosers," Mike whispered, smiling just a tad as Richie chuckled into his neck—nuzzled so close Mike was suddenly aware of the man's breath on his skin.

He wanted to roll over and cuddle closer, but his body didn't move when he told it to. The medications slowly left him feeling a raw ache in his muscles, but no more of that agonizing throb he'd had before. His hands felt heavy and his tongue felt too large in his mouth. Somehow, Richie's fingers running through his hair and his kind, undeserved, words whispered against his neck, made Mike feel

at ease. For now, at least, he wasn't alone and he wasn't going to be hit or hurt or humiliated. He would just have to wait to see what morning would bring.

5. Chapter 5

Richie felt his stomach drop as they rounded the corner of his condo's front walkway, past its gate and into the lush courtyard overflowing with desert plants and palm trees. Three of his friends were standing at his crimson-painted door, their luggage plopped down at their sides while they leaned about—clearly having been left waiting for an extended period of time. Richie froze, making Mike, who was mostly still sleep-drunk from his meds and the train and the Uber home, bump into him.

He barely mumbled out a small, “What’s the matter?” before Beverly’s head shot up from where it had been intently focusing on a crack in the sidewalk. It was as if she sensed him more so than saw him.

“Richie?” She said, getting everyone’s heads to snap in his direction.

“Uh... Hey, guys,” Richie said, trying to sound casual and failing. It showed on his face and in his posture. He had forgotten the plan. He’d been so caught up in Mike, Mike, Mike the past few days he’d entirely forgotten that the Losers Club was holding its annual meeting at his condo. Everyone had flown out to see him—and, indirectly, to meet Mike who was now leaning into Richie’s side. Richie, for the first time, hesitated to put an arm around him, afraid of what people might think. Well, not people—he didn’t care what “people” thought—but his *friends*.

“Did your flight get delayed? What the hell happened, man?” Bill asked, his stutter once again erased from history. Now, Richie was the one left stammering.

“Uh—No, no flight. Where’s, uh, Mike—other Mike,” he said, looking down at *his* Mike. Well, this was about to be *fun*.

Suddenly, Ben was standing next to him and Mike had moved to hide behind Richie like he really thought it would make him invisible.

“I texted you earlier. Mike’s flight out of Tampa got delayed. He’ll be here in a couple of hours. What happened? You were supposed to be

back from Indiana by now,” Ben said, trying not to make it obvious that he was leaning slightly over to catch a glimpse of Mike who was shifting further and further into Richie’s shadow.

“Had to make a pit stop—”

“A pit stop?” Bill said, he and Bev coming over to stand alongside Ben. “And you didn’t think to tell us? Or bother to answer one goddamned text message?”

“It’s good to see you, Rich,” Bev said, as if nothing were growing tense—even coming in for a hug which Richie awkwardly accepted, trying to balance the weight of his luggage. “Who’s your friend?” She asked.

“Oh—This is, uh... Yeah, my friend, this is Mike,” Richie said, wincing as he stepped to the side, forcing Mike to quit hiding behind him like a scared kid. In a way, Richie guessed he was just that—just a scared kid who had no idea he’d signed up for this.

“Holy shit...” Ben said, pulling back a step.

“Richie, you didn’t...” from Bill.

Mike looked back and forth between them, growing more and more anxious by the second before tensing as if he were about to bolt down the sidewalk and out the gate. There he stood, his face covered in bruises from his idiot ex- Jordan. There he stood, staring up at them with Richie’s *exact* face.

“Let’s go inside—we haven’t used a real bathroom in, like, two days,” Richie said, trying to deflect the attention off of Mike who was trying to stammer out a greeting but mostly just working his jaw nervously in silence. He fumbled for his keys and dropped them while trying to unlock his door, feeling four sets of eyes boring into his back.

“Your name’s Mike?” Beverly was asking, her voice almost frighteningly gentle.

“Y-Yeah. Mike Wheeler.”

“Tch—Wheeler. Right,” Bill mumbled, getting a huff of a laugh from

Ben.

It was Richie's only hope that Mike didn't feel as uncomfortable as he did right now. Oh, who was he kidding? Mike had to feel ten times worse. He'd been stressed since they woke up that second morning in the hotel and popping pain pills like a junkie to get through the ordeal of the train stations and uncomfortable stares he got everywhere he went. Now, when he'd been promised a quiet evening with just the two of them, he was now a spectacle for three more strangers with no hopes for escape.

"I hope Richie's been treating you well. He gives you enough to eat, right? You're skin and bone," Bev said, playfully fluffing Mike's hair—getting a warm blush to flood his cheeks—just as Richie clipped on the light inside the foyer.

"Alright, Losers. Chateau de Richie is open for—"

Bill nearly knocked him over as he pushed inside. "Where's the bathroom in this place? We've been sitting outside for three hours."

"Uh—First door on the left. Other left. Sorry, I meant the right."

"Damnit, Richie. This house isn't that big that you can't..." Whatever Bill was complaining about faded into silence with the slam of a door.

"Don't worry about him, Richie. You probably spend more time on the road than at home, huh?" Ben asked, clapping him on the shoulder as he closed the door behind them.

Mike was hiding behind Richie again, clutching onto his duffle bag as if for dear life. Richie could practically hear the kid rehearsing the phrase "Well, I can see you're busy so I'll just see myself out" over and over in his head, trying to work up the courage to spit it out. He looked like he wanted to run—he looked like he was already regretting everything, from leaving Indiana to even bothering to set foot in the comedy club bar.

"It feels like that a lot. I'm lucky to get a break for the next few weeks." He said this while looking at Mike who, for some reason,

looked away from him. They'd talked about his work schedule on the train—Mike knew when Richie eventually left for a show, he was taking Mike with him. He wouldn't be forgotten about. Why did he seem so doubtful?

Richie led them into the living area, putting his arm around Mike to keep him moving with the rest of the group—afraid he'd sprint for the door if left unattended for a fraction of a second. Introductions, he reminded himself. Get something to eat. Get some fucking alcohol down everyone's throats so they quit staring at him and just say what they meant to say—or forget it all together.

Bill rejoined them as Richie finished off his tour of the kitchen and then led them down to the "basement." It had a sliding glass door that looked out toward his back patio and pool, a billiards table lined with purple felt, and a fully stocked bar. There was a huge flat screen in the little room behind the bar which served as his gaming station, along with a few arcade games he'd been able to collect over the years. Street Fighter, sadly, was not one he'd been able to track down in good condition. But he did have pinball, and Mike was running his hands over the glass and different levers.

"This is really nice, Richie!" Bev said as she accepted a bottle of beer from his bar-side fridge.

"Yeah, the old couple I killed for it thought so too. I buried their bodies under the pool and collect their social security checks. Really living the high life," Richie said, pouring himself a tumbler of whiskey while he watched Mike tap at the buttons on one of his games—seemingly too afraid to call attention to himself by turning it on.

"Well, to the Losers Club!" Ben said, leaning his beer bottle in to clink against Bev's. Bill joined and Richie slowly followed, his eyes more on Mike than his friends.

"To the Losers," Richie mumbled, noticing that Mike had yet to put down his duffle bag.

"So when are you going to *actually* introduce us?" Bill asked, tilting his bottle toward Mike by way of pointing.

“Right—Uh, so, yeah. This is Mike—” As soon as Richie spoke his name, Mike whipped around and held his hands up as if he thought he was getting in trouble for touching the game.

“We got that part,” Bill said, glowering at Richie. What did he have to be so judgey about? Bill stepped toward Mike and extended a hand. “Mike, I’m Bill Denbrough.”

“Wait—like, the writer?” Mike asked, withdrawing his hand just before Bill could take it.

“Yeah, with the worst endings, I’ve been told. Though I think my newest one’s going to be better.” He smiled at Mike which seemed to put him a little more at ease, and he reached out his hand to finally accept the handshake.

Richie had the odd thought that Bill had better know now to squeeze Mike’s hand too tightly given the fact that it was wrapped in a cast.

“I don’t think they’re that bad—”

“Don’t go there, Mike. You’ll inflate his ego. Best he thinks he’s trash so he keeps his standards up.”

“Beep-Beep, Richie,” Bev said, smiling at him in an uncomfortably knowing way that Richie really needed to put the kibosh on. “I’m Beverly.” Mike shook her hand, then pulled back again as Ben neared him. He wouldn’t look Ben in the eyes for the longest time, and by the time he finally did, they’d already finished shaking hands.

“Sports injury?” Ben asked, gesturing to the cast around Mike’s broken hand.

“Not exactly,” Mike mumbled, looking at Richie—which got everyone else to look at Richie as well. Bill even dared to look suspicious, like the thought Richie had done it.

It took all of Richie’s very limited self-control not to say something stupid. His very first thought was to blurt out, “Go talking and you’ll get another,” because his friends would (should?) realize he wasn’t that kind of person and find it funny. But Mike wouldn’t... Mike, he knew for a fact, would not find that funny at all.

"Let me take your bag for you," Richie said instead, getting between his friends and Mike who had physically backed himself into a wall. Mike seemed reluctant to let go of the strap for a moment, but as soon as their eyes met, the boy melted for him and let go. His brown eyes were so full of doubt and fear and nerves. Richie wished there was actually something he could do to put him more at ease, but knew that only time would tell. In time, some unspecified amount of time, Mike would know that he was safe and he could relax. "I'll put it in the bedroom for you. Do you want to come with me?"

Mike nodded his head slowly, looking toward the Losers Club who were fawning over the liquor bottles on Richie's bar.

"Guys, I'm gonna show Mike upstairs really quick. Have some drinks—turn on the TV. I've got Cinemax and HBO, just lay a blanket over the couch before doing anything nasty—"

"Gross, Richie!" Bev called, smiling at him and then winking at Mike who flushed dark red and hurried toward the stairs, leaving Richie to follow sheepishly after him. He felt all their eyes on him again and it made his stomach twist. They were waiting on an explanation he couldn't give them, and he was too afraid to offer up what he did know in fear it would break Mike's trust. Things were moving too quickly, way too quickly, and he knew that, but what was he *supposed* to do? Leave him in Indiana to get beaten to a pulp again? Put him up in a hotel like a kept woman and hope he stayed there so Richie could visit him the next time he passed through town?

Richie closed the door behind them as soon as they entered his bedroom. Mike had set his duffle bag down on the floor and squatted beside it, unzipping it and starting to dig out his hairbrush and fresh clothes. Richie hadn't thought about it, but a change of clothes sounded good after two days on a train.

"Hey, I'm really, really sorry about all that," Richie said, gesturing awkwardly to the closed door. Mike looked up at him, eyes so big and attentive it made Richie's stomach flip at least half a dozen times. "I... I got caught up in—in *us* and forgot they were even supposed to be coming up."

"Well, I am pretty distracting," Mike said, smiling just a little bit as

he finished forming his little pile of clothes.

“Are you okay, though? I... I can ask them to get a hotel or—”

“No! No, no! Don’t do that—don’t. Please! I really don’t want that,” Mike said, leaping onto his feet and moving quickly to stand before Richie, grabbing his arm and rubbing it gently. Richie stared at his hand, just watching Mike’s fingers slide up and down the black fabric of his sleeve. He liked being close like this, but something about the gesture seemed...mechanical. Like this was what Mike did with his ex- anytime he thought Jordan was about to get mad.

“I just want to make sure you’re comfortable. The last few days have been...absolutely crazy. Just insane levels of crazy. I don’t want to, you know, leave you up here and then come to bed and find out you slipped out the bathroom window or something.”

“I-I was just going to ask if I could take a shower and go to bed. I’m really tired and—”

“You slept the whole time you were on the train,” Richie said, coming to realize that when Mike didn’t look him in the eye when he spoke, he was trying to avoid something. “Don’t you want something to eat? Maybe, I don’t know, have something to drink? We’re all going to watch movies or something—shoot the shit for a while.”

Mike stared at him, looking hesitant and nervous.

“Bill’s kind of a dick, but the rest are all nice. None of them are going to, like, beat you up for your lunch money or try to slip you a mickey. Bev might try to kidnap you, but that’s only because she knows I’m a freak and she’ll want to save you from me.” That got Mike to smile which made Richie feel the smallest bit better.

“I’m just going to take a shower and—”

The doorbell gave out a cheerful ring, cutting off Mike who sunk in on himself.

“That’ll... Yeah, that’ll probably be Mike—Mike Hanlon. My other friend,” Richie said, feeling the weight of Mike’s uneasy gaze. “How about this: you take a shower—”

"I got it!" Came Beverly's voice, shouting up the stairs.

"You take a shower," Richie started again, "and get settled. I'll let you know when there's food?"

"Sounds good," Mike answered, staring at the closed bedroom door as more cheerful voices wafted to the upstairs bedroom. "Um... Richie?"

"Yeah?" Richie answered, crossing the room to open his closet and pull out a fresh shirt.

"Can you... Can you maybe not...tell them about me?"

"Uh... They already saw you. Kind of hard to keep you a secret now," Richie joked, getting a blank stare in return from Mike. Trying again, he added, "Oh! You meant the other thing... Right. Yeah, you're not far along enough to start showing yet so I don't think they'll suspect anything. Wear baggy shirts just in case to hide the baby bump, alright?" Richie said, winking at Mike who glowered at him this time, doing that thing he did where he wanted to laugh but refused to give Richie the satisfaction. "Oh, you meant that douchebag whose face I punched in? My lips are sealed."

"Thank you... I know it's stupid, but—"

"Wanting privacy's not stupid," Richie said, trying not to let himself smirk as he noticed the way Mike was watching him change shirts. He didn't know what the kid saw in him with his not-so-great physique and his not-so-great fashion sense, but he seemed to like whatever it was. "Your business is your business. I'm just gonna tell them the truth—I met you in Indiana, you were cute so I took you home with me."

"Way to make me sound like a stray dog," Mike muttered, grabbing up his clothes and hairbrush before heading into the bathroom.

In typical Trashmouth fashion, he'd made things worse without meaning to. Probably how he managed to stay chronically single for the past forty years... That and the obvious other reasons, like spending three decades barking up the wrong tree.

"Mike! Hey, sorry—I didn't mean it like that. This whole thing is just

—it’s just *weird* and backwards and I haven’t slept in, like, three days. I’m sorry. I’m not trying to make fun of you. I don’t think of you like a stray—”

Richie’s voice trailed off as he followed Mike into the bathroom to find him staring at his reflection in the mirror, tears rimming Mike’s eyes after seemingly taking one look at himself. His face was still horrifically bruised and the cut on his cheek was far from subtle. It had earned them countless stares on the train and at the station, even with large sunglasses to hide his face. Each time Mike caught someone staring, he looked close to tears. Richie would kiss his temple or try to hold him, but Mike would just shy away... Richie couldn’t wait until the day the awful marks healed.

“Mike?”

The boy blinked rapidly, trying to get his composure back while Richie stared at him in concern.

“I’m fine.”

“Okay, but you’re not.”

“I’ve had worse,” Mike said, knocking over Richie’s toothbrush holder as he tried to set down his pile of clothes too quickly. “Sorry!”

“Hey, it’s okay—Mike, really. It’s fine. Can we talk about this? I... I can’t leave you up here—”

“I don’t like people to see me like this, okay? With Jordan, I stay home. If I get hit in the face, I stay home until it’s gone. I can’t believe all those people saw me like this,” Mike said, sounding on the verge of a panic attack. “All your friends—They know what I let him do to me. They know I let this happen! All your friends think—”

“They don’t judge. Okay? We’re the *Losers* Club. If you think any of us are in a position to think little of anyone, you’re wrong.” He tried a few more words that he intended to be comforting, then settled for giving Mike a small kiss on his cheek—earning a soft sigh in response that put him at least a little at ease. They couldn’t be very affectionate on the train, and honestly Richie had hardly gotten the

chance to even flirt with him at all since their night in the hotel. Maybe he shouldn't, he thought. Maybe now wasn't the time—or maybe their relationship wasn't meant to go that way at all again—but he missed it. He had to fight to remember little flashes of the night, but the things he could recall, he liked. He'd like to do them again—he'd like to see Mike comfortable enough with him to share kisses without looking devastated when Richie pulled away. "On the bright side, your face can't get any worse," Richie offered. Mike rolled his eyes and shifted away from him, going back to arranging his clothes on the counter and picking up the toothbrush holder he'd toppled.

"Go back downstairs. I promise I won't sneak out a window."

"Okay," Richie said, pulling Mike into a gentle hug that was ecstatic to actually have returned. "I'm really trusting you, though. The last person I kidnapped said the same thing, and the next thing I knew, cops were at my door asking questions." It was a stretch, but Mike chuckled at him anyway before worming out of his arms and kicking him out of the bathroom, shutting the door.

Richie finished changing clothes and ran through a few scenarios in his head of what he was going to say to his friends. They had to have the same thoughts he did—that somehow, somehow, Mike was Richie's long lost kid even though he definitely (probably?) wasn't. And when they heard that he wasn't, that Richie had taken him is because, uh, reasons? they would immediately begin the paperwork to get him committed to a mental hospital.

Stalling didn't make the situation any easier, so as Mike turned on the shower in the bathroom, Richie worked up the nerve to leave the bedroom and face his friends downstairs.

He found the Losers Club reunited at the bar in his basement, Mike Hanlon drinking a beer while catching up with Ben. When he saw Richie, he immediately went in for a hug and clapped him hard on the back.

"Richie! How have you been? How's the tour going?"

"Good! It's great—yeah. How's Florida?"

“Everything I could’ve dreamed and more.” They made small talk for a while as Richie drank the whiskey he’d poured for himself earlier and forgot, then made himself another. Mike talked about the woman he was seeing, the new job he had, and what he was hoping they could all see while they were together in California. Something about aerial trams and sky walks and waterfalls in the mountains.

“Wow, if I knew you were such a mountain man, I would’ve gotten my hiking gear out of storage,” Richie said, eyes turning toward the ceiling when he heard the water stop rushing through the pipes to the shower.

“So, Richie, I heard you brought a visitor back with you,” Mike said in his casual yet probing tone—he had a way of speaking that made you *want* to answer his questions. In another life, maybe Richie would be lounging on a couch while Mike jotted notes down on a clipboard and asked him about his relationship with his mother.

“Yeah, Richie, what’s up with *that*?” Bill asked, pointing toward the ceiling with his beer bottle.

“Right... So that’s Mike—Wheeler,” he added, nodding to Hanlon who nodded in understanding, like a cop taking down a formal statement. Richie really didn’t know where to go from there, every explanation in his head sounding outlandish and bizarre.

“And his mother is...?”

“Uh—Not sure. Because despite how it looks, and trust me I know how it looks, I am not his dad.” That statement got Mike’s eyebrows to quirk high on his forehead.

“Richie, come on,” Bev said, clicking her tongue at him.

“Yeah, now’s not the time for jokes,” Bill said.

“And I know that,” Richie said, grinning nervously out of habit. They all looked so frustrated with him and it wasn’t even an hour into their reunion. Richie bet not a single one of them stayed the entire week. “And I’m not. He’s not my kid. He just looks like that.”

“Am I...?” Mike started, looking between his friends.

"It's a kid, Mike. It's some kid who looks *exactly* like that asshole," Bill said, taking a swig of beer while glaring, actually *glaring*, at Richie like he'd done something unforgivable.

"He's not my kid!" Richie said, still smiling uncomfortably. "I'll get a paternity test—whatever, but he's not."

"So why is he with you?" Ben asked.

"I... I can't really talk about it. He had nowhere else to go," Richie said, taking another drink of whiskey.

"Can't talk about it?" Ben pressed.

"Richie..." Bev's tone was far from friendly and Richie began to feel heat creeping up his neck and burning at his cheeks.

"Hold on," Mike said, voice gentle and soothing and dripping with reason. "Let's back up. Where did you meet Mike?"

"Indiana, at my show," Richie said, knocking back his glass and immediately pouring another. The familiar warmth in his chest as the drink settled in his stomach was damn near comforting.

"He was just...there? In the audience?" Mike asked.

"No. He was at the bar. Snuck in with a fake ID. I noticed he had my face, asked him about it; he said there's no way in hell I've ever met his mom and..." He really didn't want to add the rest. "Here we are."

"So you've got a homeless teenager drinking underage at your show and you brought him here?" Bill asked. "Do you realize how insane that sounds?"

"Yeah, well," Richie paused to take a longer drink than necessary, swallowing probably two shots of liquor at once, "he was cute and I was drunk and here we are."

"Oh, Rich, you didn't," Bill said. Richie didn't have to be looking at him to feel the disgust twisting his face. "He's *definitely* related to you! He looks *exactly* like you—aside from the fact that someone beat the face off him."

"No. No he does not. Because Mike has brown eyes and mine are blue," Richie said, feeling his shoulders rise up defensively, as if a difference in eye color could somehow guarantee their lack of familial relation. Maybe it was the liquor talking or the lack of sleep, but he already wanted to get Bill back for punching him in the face all those years ago when they'd been kids.

"So, wait," Mike chimed in, "let me get this straight—"

"Get it gay, you mean?" Richie attempted, earning a disgruntled *humph* from Bill. "Look, I know it looks bad. I know it's weird and I'm weird and I'm probably going to end up in the tabloids or jail or on the news or something—but he was in a bad spot. Did you see his face? The rest of him looks exactly the same. He had nowhere to go. I like him, so I took him in."

"You just met him three days ago!" Bill called. "He could be on drugs—he could be in a fucking gang. You don't *know* that punk!"

"Punk!?" Richie snapped, nearly smashing the glass in his hand with how forcefully he slammed it onto the bar. All he could think of in the back of his mind was that broom stick coming down and crushing Mike's face and hand while Richie just stood there, helpless. All he could think of was that that had happened to Mike before. That same treatment happened to Mike *all the time*, and Bill wanted to stand there and call him a punk!?

"No *normal* person runs off with a guy he just met! A guy old enough *to be his dad!*"

"Let him speak," Mike interjected, holding out his hands in a calming, keep-the-peace gesture. "Richie's a grown man. If he says there was no other option—"

"Mike, you haven't seen this kid. It's a child!"

"He's eighteen," Richie snapped, going to top off his glass only to have Beverly slide it away from him and pass him a fresh beer instead. "Look, I know it's stupid and I know you're all pissed at me because I got back late and you were all stuck outside. Whatever. I get it. If you want to keep throwing it in my face, fine. I don't care.

Just leave him out of it. He's been through enough."

"No one's trying to drag him into anything," Ben said, in that same peace-keeping tone Mike was using. "We just want to understand what happened. After your show, you went dark. You hardly answered any of us. We all got really worried about you and then—then you showed up with Mike and... It's just *weird*, you know? The past two years have been hell—it's been hell for all of us. I'm lucky to have Beverly to help get me through it. Bill has Audra, and Mike has his new friend," Ben smiled at Mike briefly, still clearly excited over the news, "but you didn't have anybody. You've been out here by yourself so we got worried. Then you showed up with Mike and we're all... We're all just kinda taken aback."

"Well, he's not some midlife crisis," Richie said defensively while his brain immediately asked itself, *Is he a midlife crisis?* "And he's not my son or my brother or my nephew. He's... He's just Mike. He's Mike from Indiana."

"Mike from Indiana with his face beat to a pulp," Bill added. Richie glared at him, but didn't dignify the comment with an answer.

"And why did you bring Mike here?" Mike asked. "Did he ask you to?"

"I asked him to," Richie said, taking a swig of beer. "He had nothing for him out there. He may as well have been homeless. I felt bad for him."

"I feel bad for a lot of people, but it doesn't make me move my one night stands home with me," Bill said.

"Well, it's my fucking house that I fucking paid for and if I want Mike *here* and *he* wants to be here, then I don't see the fucking problem," Richie snapped. "Now are we here to criticize my life choices, or are we here to have a fucking party?"

"Well, to have a party, we need something to eat," Beverly said, effectively steering the conversation to more stable waters. Bill wasn't about to argue with her, and if he tried it would be a lost cause. Ben would take her side, Richie would take her side... Three versus one,

motherfucker.

“Pizza? Chinese?” Richie offered.

At the mention of Chinese, everyone immediately groaned—bringing Richie back to that awful yet somehow simultaneously magical night in Derry.

“Pizza then,” he said, taking out his phone. He ordered more food than his friends could possibly eat, along with soda and garlic bread sticks and whatever else looked appealing because he was already well on his way to being drunk.

He listened as his friends talked about their lives—girlfriends, wives, dogs and house shopping. The conversation never really circled back to Richie since it was already far too obvious what he’d been up to: drinking, drinking, show business, drinking, and sleeping with an eighteen-year-old with a crushed in face that he moved in on a whim.

When the pizza arrived, he went upstairs to sign the receipt and then put all of the food in the kitchen before going up to his room to tell Mike. The boy was laying in his bed as if asleep with the lights on, but opened his eyes as soon as Richie appeared. Even as he acted the part of a recluse, he somehow seemed so warm and inviting to Richie who wanted little more than to turn out the light and curl up next to him.

Fuck the party and Bill in particular. He’d rather hide out here, too.

“You could’ve come downstairs,” Richie said, withholding the temptation to climb onto the mattress. If he laid down now, he wasn’t getting back up. “You look bored.”

“Nah. It’s easier to talk about me when I’m not in the room. Unless you’re Jordan.”

“Well, I’m not that guy, and mostly they just wanted to know what the heck is wrong with me. They don’t think anything bad about you.”

“Food’s here?” Mike said, ignoring Richie’s statement entirely.

“Yeah. I got soda and stuff. Bread sticks. Pizza...”

“Can you make me a Jack and Coke while no one’s looking?”

“Who cares if they’re looking? They all drank at your age. Except Eddie...” Richie paused, realizing what he’d said and feeling his stomach drop. “But if you want me to make it our dirty little secret, that’s fine,” Richie said, hoping his forced grin and small wink were enough to keep Mike distracted.

There was a hint of concern in the boy’s eyes as he got up from the bed, but not much and he didn’t push the issue as he made his way downstairs, hiding behind Richie every step of the way. Just before he stepped into the kitchen where his friends had all gathered, Richie had the awful thought that with Mike’s broken hand and cut cheek, he looked a little bit like Eddie too.

6. Chapter 6

Mike could tell Richie was anxious and didn't know what he could do, if anything, to make him feel better. It was clearly his fault that Richie was upset—his fault for distracting him, his fault for getting Richie involved with him, his fault for making Richie feel obligated to take him in. He knew, despite Richie's attempts to convince him otherwise, that Richie's friends didn't like him being around. Mike tried to get his pizza and take his doctored glass of Pepsi upstairs to the bedroom, but Richie stopped him with an arm around the shoulders and kept him trapped in the basement with the others.

Mike liked Mr. Hanlon—the *other* Mike. He was attentive and soft spoken, and the questions he asked never seemed to have a deeper meaning.

What sports did he like? Did he like video games? DnD? What was his class?

They had conversations all their own while Richie talked to his friends. Every now and then, Mike would catch Richie looking at him out the corner of his eyes—reminiscent of that night in the bar—smiling lazily.

“My girlfriend's daughter really loves DnD. She's a...what is it called? Uh—Paladin! Is that right?”

“Yeah!” Mike finished his glass of Pepsi and looked to Richie who seemed to sense Mike's eyes on him. He turned away from Ben to wink at him, getting a warm flush to cross Mike's cheeks.

Richie got up from the couch (while Ben was still talking to him, making the other man pause in confusion) and took Mike's empty glass and plate, asking if anyone else wanted more to eat or drink as a cover for him pouring a long shot of whiskey into Mike's cup before topping it off with soda.

“Are you giving him alcohol?” Bill asked, making Mike tense the slightest bit. Bill was the one who liked him the least. Ben was hesitant, Beverly was...attentive. But Bill hated Mike's guts.

“What? Me? No—It’s cough syrup. He’s fighting a terrible cold,” Richie said, winking at Mike again as he set the glass and plate—once again full of pizza Mike didn’t have room for—in front of him.

“Come on now, Bill. You used to have a taste for the hard stuff when you were his age. I remember,” Mr. Hanlon said, smiling at the writer who shrugged.

“The hard stuff? Wait, you mean I wasn’t the only homo—”

“Beep-Beep, Richie!” Beverly said, laughing at the joke regardless. Mike liked her, too, though sometimes her knowing stares made him uneasy. He probably looked like some helpless child in need of being saved, what with the bruises littering his cheeks and neck. He’d intentionally put on a long sleeve shirt to hide the marks on his arms, but he felt that she could see them anyway somehow. His broken hand didn’t help.

Mr. Hanlon asked more questions about DnD, then ventured into the more personal questions about where he was from and what made him agree to move to LA.

“I didn’t,” Mike said, suddenly feeling every pair of eyes in the room turn to him. Just as he’d suspected, they’d all been talking to Richie but keeping their ears trained on what Mike had to say. “He said if I didn’t come to LA with him, he’d kidnap my whole family and make them listen to his set. I had to save them—take one for the team, you know?” He looked back at Richie, just to catch another one of his lazy smiles.

“What? No comeback? Don’t tell me he’s got you speechless,” Ben said.

“Nah, Mike knows if I kidnapped his whole family, I’d leave him for his sister.”

“She has a boyfriend, you loser,” Mike said, smiling at him—loving the playful fire in Richie’s eyes.

“Eh, guess you’ll have to do then. I’ll have to find another use for all the rope and duct tape in my suitcase.”

"You could tape your mouth shut. Do us all a favor," Mike said, beaming with pride at how red Richie's face became—blushing with humor as opposed to rage. If he'd ever even tried to joke with Jordan this way, his face would've ended up smashed into the coffee table. But with Richie—with Richie, teasing him was like the correct answer to anything.

"Wow, Richie. You sure you don't want to take a paternity test? Because this kid—he's *you*," Ben said, laughing heartily. "He's literally *you*."

"Do we really look that much alike? Because I don't see it," Mike said, looking to Mr. Hanlon while gesturing to his hairline which was far more thick and full with curls than Richie's.

"You know, I did bring some old photo albums. I was going to save them for later, but...if no one's opposed—"

"Opposed? Mr. Librarian, get those things out here and show this kid," Bill said. He seemed to be in better spirits after he'd switched from beer to wine. "His head will explode—don't even go there, Richie."

"Fine, fine. Bring out the year books. What was my senior quote again? Don't stop believin' in evil clowns?"

"No, that's what you wanted it to be and Mrs. Sanders changed it to just 'don't stop believin'," Ben chimed in.

"What is it with you and clowns?" Mike asked, not expecting the suddenly grave looks everyone was giving him. Slowly, their eyes turned to Richie who looked at them like he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"What? What!? Am I supposed to start every introduction with, 'Hi, my name's Richie—my friends and I were almost killed by an evil killer clown from outer space'?"

"Love that movie," Mike said, accidentally getting everyone's gazes fixed on him again. "*Killer Klowns from Outer Space*? That's not what you're talking...about?"

“Crazed serial killer in Derry. Big, bad guy. Dressed like a clown—new subject!” Richie said, clapping his hands and somehow succeeding in ending the discussion. Mike knew better than to push an issue when a man said he was finished talking about it.

He looked to Mr. Hanlon who was still regarding Richie in contemplation. He stayed that way, stoic and silent a moment, then looked to Mike and smiled. “Want to come with me to get those photo albums?”

Mike quickly took a drink of his Pepsi and Jack and set it on the table before following Mr. Hanlon upstairs to where his suitcase rested beside the front door.

“I think you’re really in for a surprise,” Mr. Hanlon said, digging out two large scrapbooks from a neatly folded pile of clothes. “We’re not just teasing Richie about your similarities. Here, let me show you.”

Mike watched, transfixed, as Mr. Hanlon flipped through the pages, settling on one and flipping the book around so Mike could see it better. It was a photo of six boys crammed together in what appeared to be log cabin or some other structure made of wooden beams with a dirt floor. Mr. Hanlon didn’t need to point out himself, the only one in the photograph with a dark complexion, or Richie.

If Mike didn’t know better, he’d think the photo had been doctored.

Richie *did* look like him. Same curly hair, same lanky frame. Mike wouldn’t be caught dead in the tacky Hawaiian shirt and he didn’t need glasses that took up eighty-percent of his face, but there was no mistaking the likeness between them.

“Whoa!”

“Whoa is right,” Mr. Hanlon said, chuckling. “See, there’s Richie and then right here is Bill, and then you’ve got Ben—”

“*That’s* Ben!? Talk about a glow up! Wow!” He stared at the chubby boy in the photograph, thinking about the male-model looking guy downstairs drinking beer. He’d have to give him a high-five later, if Richie didn’t mind him touching one of his friends.

"I know! I was so surprised—I almost didn't recognize him."

"Where's Beverly?" Mike asked.

"Oh, you see, she moved away the summer after...we all became friends. Unfortunately, I didn't get a picture of all of us together."

"So who are these other guys?" Mike asked, pointing to an anxious looking boy with short, dark hair and a taller boy with light curls and a big smile. He seemed friendly, his beaming grin in the photograph feeling welcoming—as if it were meant for him.

"Yes, that's Stan Uris," Mr. Hanlon said, pointing to the boy with the friendly smile, "and that's Eddie Kaspbrak."

"Eddie?" Mike said, flashing back to earlier when Richie had dropped the name—and then his smile. "What happened to him? Did you guys just lose touch or—?"

"Richie didn't tell you?" Mr. Hanlon said, looking concerned when Mike shook his head no. "I guess he wouldn't have if he didn't mention *it* either."

"It?"

"Yes... You see, Eddie and Stan, they were murdered. In a way, Stan was murdered—indirectly, I supposed, by *it*. Some other time I'll maybe explain more. It's a lot to get into."

"You mean...by the serial killer? The one Richie was talking about earlier?" Mike asked.

"I...I suppose you could say that. You could call it that, yes..."

Mr. Hanlon was explaining something, but Mike was hung up on that sad look Richie had gotten earlier when he'd mentioned Eddie. This kid in the photograph, the one Richie had his arm around, was dead—had been killed.

"When did it happen?" Mike asked, inadvertently cutting off Mr. Hanlon who looked taken aback. Mike flinched, realizing what he'd done—realizing that he hadn't been paying proper attention, that he

was rude to this man who had spent all evening paying attention to *him* and making sure he was happy. “Sorry! I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to cut you off. I’m sorry.”

Mr. Hanlon looked him over, assessing the bruises on Mike’s face, and seemed to come to a conclusion about them all in the instant before he nodded and said, “It’s alright. They passed two years ago. It was a very hard time for us. That’s why we’re here now—to celebrate our lives and the lives of the friends we lost.”

“And then there’s just me... In the way,” Mike said, looking back toward the stairwell to the basement—where Richie was. Richie who had suffered a great loss and just wanted to celebrate and mourn with his friends and was stuck babysitting Mike instead. “I didn’t know any of them and I don’t have any business being here—”

“You’re a friend of Richie’s aren’t you?” Mr. Hanlon said, his calm voice squashing the fear that had started brewing in Mike’s chest.

“I guess,” Mike said, wondering if his infatuation had a right to be called friendship so soon. He hadn’t known about Eddie or this serial killer or any of that. He didn’t really know Richie at all; and Richie sure as shit didn’t know him.

“Then you are absolutely in the right place, and you definitely belong here. Don’t let *anyone* make you feel otherwise,” he said, pointing, distinctly, to the dark bruise on Mike’s jaw.

Mike looked away from him and stared down at the open scrap book. There were more photos on this page of Bill and Stan and Eddie. He tried to imagine what it would have been like if he’d been a kid when they were. Would they have liked him enough to invite him into their group? Would Richie still look at him with those lazy smiles and playful eyes?

Who could ever like to look at—

“Can I ask you a question, Mike? You don’t have to answer.” Mr. Hanlon’s voice was so warm and inviting, it made Mike trust him—or want desperately to trust him. “Did Richie do that to you?”

Mike felt his face fall slack, horror and hurt welling up in his chest at the very implication.

“No! No, Richie would never! He *saved* me from this! He—”

Mr. Hanlon stopped him with a warm hand on the shoulder. It made Mike calm down enough to realize he’d been tricked into answering the question he otherwise wouldn’t have. If Mr. Hanlon just asked what happened to his face, Mike probably would’ve deflected the question or lied about it. He didn’t want to talk about, not really—not at the moment anyway—but Mr. Hanlon was wise enough to get around that wall of defenses way too easily.

“Well, whatever the case may be, I’m glad you’re in a better place now—we all are.”

“Richie’s really nice,” Mike said, not sure how to respond, not used to the attention Mr. Hanlon was giving him or his kind words. It made him nervous that Richie would overhear and think they were flirting—that he would get jealous and lash out, shove Mike out onto the unfamiliar streets.

“He likes you,” Mr. Hanlon said, chuckling the smallest bit which caused Mike’s face to flush. “I can tell. Now, let’s go share these with the others,” Mr. Hanlon said, smiling and closing up the albums. He carried one and Mike carried the other, trailing behind him down to the basement where Richie was, for some reason, speaking in a cockney accent right into Bill’s ear. It looked an awful lot like Bill was about to punch him, but Ben and Beverly were reeling with laughter.

As soon as the coffee table by the leather couch was cleared of plates (which Mike tried to take upstairs to the kitchen only to be grabbed by Richie and pulled down onto the couch beside him) and the photo albums opened, the energy in the room seemed to shift. Everyone’s attention went to the pictures, no longer talking over each other, but rather sharing in each other’s stories.

Remember when? Remember *how*? When did we? Why *didn’t* we?

Did we really dress like that? (“What are you talking about? I still

dress like that. What's wrong with the way I dress? Do you have a problem with the way I dress?" Directed at Mike by Richie who ruffled Mike's hair playfully, clearly not remembering the awful bump on the back of his head from the cane, and nuzzled his cheek when Mike couldn't find words to answer.)

"You see it, though, right? Right, Mike?" Bill asked, looking to Mr. Hanlon while pointing at a photo of Richie in the album. "Exactly the same—exactly!"

"I can see the similarities," Mr. Hanlon said, smiling as if he were trying to bite back his enthusiasm.

"What? You think that's weird?" Richie asked, his words slurred and lazy. He had his arm wrapped around Mike's waist, holding him close without feeling restricting, his hand claspng onto Mike's thigh.

"It's weird. C'mon, you know it's weird! Mike? You're with me, right?" Bill asked, looking to Mike this time who was so startled at being addressed that he pushed back further into the couch—further into Richie's side—out of nerves. "Right, Mike? You see it too, don't you?"

"I-I... Yeah," Mike said, looking to Richie in hopes that he'd provide the correct answer.

"Stop! You're embarrassing him," Beverly said, trying to sound stern though her reddened cheeks and stifled chuckle indicated that she, too, was drunk with very little conviction.

"You guys wanna see something weirder? Weirder 'n that?" Richie asked, his hand tightening on Mike's thigh, though no one else seemed to notice.

"If you pull your pants down, I'm gonna deck you," Bill said, laughing hard—a boisterous, drunken laugh.

Mike had a couple of drinks, but he wasn't feeling half as gone as they all seemed to be. Richie specifically—

And then Richie's mouth was smashed against his own and Mike was so startled by it that he froze up, his hands rising defensively against

Richie's chest without daring to push him away. It wasn't a deep kiss, but it was drunken and sloppy and Mike felt his cheeks start to burn as Richie's friends all gasped or groaned or laughed.

"Damnit, Richie. Stop!" With disgust.

"You crazy bastard." With humor.

"Honey—Honey, he doesn't like that!" With a knowing tone so painful it made Mike's chest ache.

"Richie..." Disappointment.

Richie pulled back, meeting Mike's gaze with a lopsided smile. He lifted a hand to caress Mike's cheek, shockingly gentle for how far gone he was. All Mike could taste on his lips was alcohol—all he could smell was booze. And yet Richie was smiling at him. Richie was being gentle and soft and something so painfully close to loving that Mike was tempted to let himself forget that anyone else was in the room besides them. It was the look Richie had given him outside the comedy club—when he'd said he really fucking liked him.

After Jordan, after the Urgent Care, after the two days of hell on the train, Richie still liked him.

"Do you feel better now? Got that out of your system?" Bill asked.

"Are you okay, Mike?" Beverly asked, her warm hand suddenly caressing his back though he didn't turn to face her. He didn't remember her joining them on the couch.

He was too busy drinking in Richie's gaze. He was letting himself get lost in it, letting himself let go. He wasn't even close to being as drunk as them, but he felt as if he were on cloud nine. Somehow, as if by a miracle, Richie *still* liked him—still liked him *like that*.

"I think we need to let them get a room," Ben said, chuckling as he cracked open another bottle of beer.

"Get a room? It's my damn house," Richie laughed, kissing Mike quickly on the corner of his mouth before leaning in to whisper the *same thing he had at the hotel*. "I have wanted to do that all night."

“Well, go to a room without us in it,” Bill snapped.

Beverly’s hand was still rubbing Mike’s back so gently it was as if she knew his bruises were there. Maybe she did—maybe Richie told them. Mike hoped he hadn’t, but with Richie staring at him with so much affection, it wasn’t hard for Mike to forgive him.

“Don’t listen to him—he’s still closed minded. Old backwoods boy, ain’t that right, Billy?” Richie asked, putting on a hillbilly accent that had Mike laughing despite himself.

For a while, their attention went back to the photo albums until Richie was nodding in and out of a drunken stupor. It took Ben and Mr. Hanlon to get him up to his room. Mike tried to follow—tried to help—but as he was about to go upstairs, Bill snagged him by the arm with a grip so tight it hurt.

Beverly had ducked into the restroom, leaving Mike alone with the writer who was staring at him like he was deciding whether to yell at him or deck him in the face. Mike knew that look well.

“I-I want to go check on Richie,” Mike stammered, trying to pull his arm free only to have Bill squeeze his wrist tighter and shove the sleeve of his sweater up to his elbow, exposing the yellowing and brown blotches of old bruises. “Please—I want to check on him. Please!” Mike whimpered as Bill shoved his sleeves up further, raising his arm as if to get a better look to see if the marks were real...or to check for track marks like he thought Mike was some kind of junkie. “Please—I just want to check on Richie. Y-You’re hurting me. Please!”

“You listen to me, and you listen good,” Bill said, his tone of voice matching the one Jordan had right before he was about to start a beating. Mike felt his stomach drop and he twisted his arm in Bill’s grasp, no doubt giving himself more marks that he prayed Richie wouldn’t notice and ask about. “Richie is my friend. He’s a good guy and he doesn’t deserve whatever stunt it is that you’re trying to pull —”

“I’m not trying to do anything! Please! I wouldn’t hurt Richie—”

"I don't believe that for a second." His words were slurred and his eyes hard. He wouldn't let go of Mike's arm and Mike *knows* where this leads. He knows... He's going to get punched until he's on his knees, then he'll be kicked until he's on the ground completely.

"Please, *please*," Mike whimpered, twisting his wrist in Bill's grasp until he felt it pop. "Ow! Please—I wouldn't... I-I'd never! Please! I just want to check on Richie!"

"You show up out of the blue and get his head in a twist, get him feeling all bad for you. I see right through you—"

"I can see through your bullshit, Mike! I know when you're lying to me! I can see right through you! You cheating, little fucking whore!"

Bill was still growling at him, still squeezing his sore wrist, but Mike couldn't hear him. He was hearing Jordan, he was seeing him clear as day—he could almost smell him! All sawdust and stale cigarettes. So close to his face, so ready to beat him down into submission. Mike felt tears leak down his face, dripping off his chin helplessly.

He wanted Richie... But Richie didn't want him. How could he? Mike was trash. Mike was worthless. Mike was a con. An idiot. A fool. Who could want him?

"No one but me is ever gonna love someone as useless as you!"

"Bill!" The sharp voice cut through Mike's thoughts, making his head snap up from where it hung low, examining the floor without seeing it. "What is the matter with you? Let him go!" Beverly had come back into the room, her face both shocked and stern. She pulled Mike away from Bill's grip with ease, and he was afraid for a moment that she was going to try to hug him. He didn't want touched—he didn't want Richie to somehow regain his bearings and show up and get the wrong idea. Even if Mike didn't deserve his affection or his attention, he wanted them both. He didn't want called a cheater so soon.

"You know as well as I do—"

"Bill, you're *drunk*. It's been a long night. Don't take it out on Mike," she said, her voice reminding Mike of his mother. He couldn't decide

if he liked it or not, but it was better than the screaming.

"I'm not taking anything out on him!" Bill said, sounding like he was shocked she didn't see his point of view. "Don't you think it's weird? I mean, look at him!"

"It's a *coincidence*, Bill. It doesn't give you the right to terrorize him. If Richie finds out, he'll kill you! Don't do it again," she snapped, putting an arm around Mike as he'd feared she would and leading him upstairs to the kitchen.

Seeing the mess left over on the counter from when they'd cleared the basement, Mike was plagued by the impulse to start washing up the dishes—all the small glasses and pizza plates. Maybe if he did more, maybe if he showed that he was willing to help out, Richie's friends wouldn't mistake him for a leech...

"Are you okay? Did he hurt your arm?"

"I'm okay," Mike said, quickly rolling his sleeve back down to hide the reddened marks from Bill's fingers digging into him. "I-I'm going to—"

"He had no right to do that, okay? He's just protective of all of us. I don't mean to make excuses—he had no right—but he's worried about Richie. We all are. He doesn't always do the best at taking care of himself and...Bill's worried. He doesn't want to see Richie get hurt again."

Mike didn't know what to say to her—or what to say to Bill. He just wanted to go upstairs and make sure Richie was okay, that he wasn't puking his guts out with no water to rehydrate himself. He wanted to take care of Richie and everyone thought he wanted to take advantage of him.

"Richie saved me," Mike said to her, instinctively wrapping his arms around his torso, ashamed to still have tears in his eyes. "He... He didn't have to. He could've left me—he really *should've* left me, but he didn't. I-I wouldn't ever hurt him. If you guys want me to go—"

"None of us want you to go. None of us want that. Bill's just drunk

and... Honey, don't worry about it. The only people you need to worry about are *you* and Richie. He really likes you. Richie, really, really likes you. It would devastate him if you left because we made you uncomfortable."

Toward the end of her speech, Mr. Hanlon came back down from upstairs, shaking his head.

"Gonna need a bottle of water and some Tylenol for the morning, but I think he'll pull through."

"Is it messy?" Beverly asked.

"It's like the summer of '92 up there."

"I wasn't there for that, but it doesn't sound like a good thing," Beverly said, cringing.

"Ben's taking care of it."

The words rang in Mike's ears like a gunshot and he tried to make his way to the stairs only to have Mr. Hanlon place a hand on his shoulder.

"Ben's taking care of it," he repeated before seeming to notice the tears on Mike's face. "Are you alright? Did something happen?" He asked, looking to Beverly this time. She gave an exasperated gestures with her arms and shook her head.

"Bill got all worked up. I left him alone five minutes..."

"I'm fine," Mike said, unable to stand the way they spoke about him as if he weren't in the room. "Really, just forget it. It's fine. I'm fine. I just want to go check on Richie. I... I need to make sure he's okay." He looked at his feet as he spoke, unable to meet their gaze. He didn't want their pity or compassion. He wanted to disappear.

"Well, Ben's got it under control. Let him get Richie cleaned up," Mr. Hanlon was saying. Cleaned up? What had happened up there? It set Mike's heart on edge. "Do you want to help me set up a bed on the couch? Richie said there's spare sheets in the laundry room. Your guess is as good as mine where that might be."

Mike looked reluctantly up at the stairs, wanting to be with Richie—wanting to be where he belonged, at his side—and then quietly set himself to the task of checking the closed doors, looking for the laundry room.

He found the garage and a beautiful red Mustang, then found a closet, a pantry, a tiny closet that gave access to the water heater. While he searched, Mr. Hanlon was down in the basement talking to Bill while Beverly went upstairs to find Ben. Mike found the spare room on the main floor of the condo—a tiny single bed that had Bill's suitcase sitting on it. Quickly, so as to not be accused of snooping, he closed the door and continued his search, finally finding a sad, deflated pillow and spare sheets on a rack above a matching red washer/dryer set.

Not knowing what to do with himself, he sat on the couch, holding the linens and pillow while he listened to the muffled conversations around him. Mr. Hanlon was trying to talk sense to Bill, Beverly and Ben were gossiping, and Mike was left alone to worry about whether or not they were going to let him sleep upstairs in Richie's room or if they intended to keep him downstairs—keep them separated. His heart raced at the very thought...

What would they do to him if they caught him alone? He didn't have his pain meds and his hand was starting to hurt. Not to mention his other wrist from Bill squeezing it... No. No, that wasn't right. Mike's wrist was hurt because *he* tried to get free. If he'd stood still like he was supposed to, he wouldn't have gotten hurt.

Another tear cut down his cheek. He had let himself get so caught up in his fantasy that had been the hotel room and the comedy club that he forgot what he was... A burden. Richie could smile at him all he liked, kiss him all he liked, but Mike was still a burden.

He wanted to be with *Richie*. These people, these strangers who saw him for what he was, were going to kick him out onto the street and Richie would think he just left. Ungrateful and selfish.

He couldn't let them do this. He had to prove his worth. He had to show Richie that he could care, too. That he could try to love Richie and give him what he deserved. If he could do that for a brute like

Jordan, it should be easy to do it for someone as wonderful as Richie.

Mike left the blankets and pillow on the couch and started up the steps, pushing in between Ben and Beverly in order to get into Richie's room which already smelled of booze and vomit—though the only mess in sight was Richie passed out in the bed. Mike closed the door, blocking out the voices that might've called to him—he couldn't tell—and climbed onto the bed.

Richie was blacked out, snoring softly, but otherwise no worse for wear. Mike snuggled up at Richie's back, hugging him around the waist and burying his face into the back of Richie's neck. He felt achy and raw, remembering that he didn't take his pills before laying down—realizing that the light was on and he didn't feel like getting up to turn it off.

He tried to focus on the good things that had happened—the photo albums, the jarring and somehow lovely kiss, the adoring look Richie gave him that he didn't deserve. His brain, however, had other plans—dragging up questions about “it” and the serial killer and whatever murdered Richie's friends.

Mike felt bad for not realizing sooner that under his awful jokes and boundless energy, Richie was hiding pain.

Richie was hurt, too.

7. Chapter 7

Notes for the Chapter:

I wrote part of this chapter while on my work computer which monitors what you type, so if there are any censored curse words hidden in this chapter, my bad. I think I caught them all in my review, but I miss some here and there. Please enjoy this problematically long chapter!

Richie woke up needing to vomit.

The first thing he did, though, was fall out of his bed and smack his face into the floor like a fucking idiot. It did nothing for his stomach and he ended up puking into the sink because he couldn't reach the toilet two paces further away in time. Luckily all he had in his stomach was fucking booze.

He rinsed away his sick, then rinsed his mouth—then vomited into the toilet properly this time. He rinsed his mouth again, then brushed his teeth and took a shower. He knew it was bad when he could smell the reek of a frat party on himself even after scrubbing himself twice over.

Three times he almost fell down in the shower. More than hungover, he was definitely still drunk. There were gaping holes in his memory again of the night before. He remembered kissing Mike when the boy obviously didn't want it, though.

Shit... That was going to be a fun mess to clean up. Hopefully Mike wouldn't hold it against him—or maybe he should. Getting pissed off at a creep who pushed passed his boundaries was how Mike *should* react. *Fuck*. Richie didn't even know what he expected—what he wanted. It wasn't like he wanted Mike to be mad at him, but if they were ever going to become something *more*, the kid was going to have to learn to set boundaries. And Richie was going to have to stop getting blind drunk and speeding past them.

Once he'd scrubbed himself down properly and washed his hair,

Richie took half a minute to rinse off and get out of the shower. He patted at himself with the hand towel because he forgot full-sized towels were a thing for a moment...

Yup. Definitely still drunk. Next he'd probably be rolling on the bathmat to dry off.

He made his way back to his bedroom, naked, realizing the place reeked to high heavens. Mike was still asleep in the bed, the overhead light was on, and the sun wasn't up yet. Had Mike passed out drunk too? God, he hoped they didn't do anything more than sleep. He didn't think Mike would be able to forgive him if they screwed and he didn't remember a thing about it twice.

Richie turned off the light and went over to the window, cracking it open to let in the fresh air—let the booze and sweat smell eek out. He found himself a clean pair of pajama pants and put them on, then crawled back into bed beside Mike who squirmed around a little before settling back down, still sound asleep. Richie pressed a soft kiss to his temple, then gave into his spins—feeling the entire room spin around at thousands of miles per hour. The only comfort he found was in running his open palm up and down Mike's back, feeling the boy breathe and wondering why that small, automatic gesture had him transfixed.

In and out. Up and down. It was just breathing. Just Mike breathing...

And yet it was just so easy to get lost in him—to forget that anything else existed. Forget that he had four other people crammed into his condo judging him and trying to ask what the hell was wrong with him.

A lot. The answer was a fucking lot was wrong with him. He'd watched one of his best friends lose his little brother. He watched a town suffer the loss of countless children—countless classmates. He suffered from bullies, he suffered from a terrifying fucking clown trying to scare the life literally out of him. He lost a friend to suicide. He watched his best friend get stabbed through the fucking chest by a fucking demon claw. He washed his best friend's blood off his glasses after leaving his corpse to rot in the sewers...

There was a lot wrong with him, so why did everyone get so hung up on Mike?

Because he was young? Because they looked alike? Yeah, it was weird, but c'mon. So was a lot of other shit they'd been through. Stranger things had happened, right? Stranger than one man in his forties falling for one kid in his teens. At least he was legal! At least he wasn't twelve and Richie wasn't calling him Lolita in pervy memoirs.

"It's too hot," came a sleepy grumble, spoken mostly into the pillow.

"Take that sweatshirt off, you lobster," Richie answer, his voice almost as wrecked—either from being drunk or from puking his guts out, Richie wasn't exactly sure.

"Lobster?" It almost sounded like Mike didn't know what the word meant.

"Yeah. Lobster. You're boiling yourself alive. How many shirts do you have on?"

"Three," came Mike's honest answer.

"Take off the sweater," Richie said, tugging playfully at the cuff off his sleeve. He couldn't help but smile as Mike shifted around the smallest bit on the blankets.

"Nn."

"I won't let anyone come in and see you. You can stay under the blankets." He kept throwing out more suggestions, realizing he was probably pushing it way too far—but Mike was sweating and flushed under all the layers as the warm California air wafted in past the curtains.

Finally, Mike shifted out of his sweater and one of the two shirts underneath. He was left in a gray tank top that was stuck to his flesh with sweat.

Richie tried not to stare at the bruises. They were fading a bit, turning yellow instead of brilliant indigo. He couldn't wait until they

were gone—faded into oblivion to never, *ever* return. He bet Mike would come into himself more once his body wasn't literally a constant reminder of that asshole and the abuse he'd endured. It had ripped his heart to pieces when Mike cried just from seeing his own battered reflection. No one should have to feel that way. No one should look at themselves and cry because of someone else's cruelty.

Richie had to think, too, that with bruises on his skin in so many places—so many dark bruises everywhere—that it had to hurt to move. It had to hurt when Richie touched him...when anyone touched him. Why would anyone want to do that to someone as sweet and gentle as Mike?

"Feel better?" Richie asked, forcing his gaze away from all the marks showing on his shoulder blades and arms. He focused, instead, on the boy's mop of curly, messed up hair and how silky smooth it was sliding between Richie's fingers.

"Cold," Mike said, getting a laugh out of Richie who slung an arm over the boy's hips and pulled him in for a cuddle.

He liked this. There wasn't enough of this out on the road when he was hooking up with strangers and sneaking out at daybreak. His last serious girlfriend didn't even like to cuddle—got all weird about it. Should've been his first red flag. Mike, on the other hand, shifted back against him and sighed as he got cozy.

"How's your hand?"

"How's your head?" Mike answered, all cranky as he rolled over and nuzzled his head into Richie's shoulder.

Richie was so fucking stoked Mike liked to cuddle too. The kid fucking deserved it—really. Richie smoothed his palms up and down Mike's arms, his flushed skin already starting to feel clammy as the air chilled the sheen of sweat that had settled over it.

"Swollen."

"Your head? It's swollen? Oh—God, gross! Fuck you," Mike said, rolling away.

“Gross? What... No! Get your head out of the gutter. Jesus,” Richie laughed, moving in for a spoon—molding himself to the bends in Mike’s body. “Fuckin’ hurts,” Richie said, meaning his head and then deciding to dig the hole he was in deeper. “Throbbing really. *Aching*.” He accentuated each word by pressing a kiss to the back of Mike’s neck.

“Nasty. I’m sleeping,” Mike said while deliberately pushing his hips back against Richie’s. Richie smiled against his neck and returned to stroking Mike’s arm. He considered moving his hands lower, but thought better of it. Not like this—not half-drunk with Ben and Beverly in the next room. Not with Mike’s body all beat to hell. It’d be too easy to hurt him on accident and Richie would never forgive himself.

So, he let himself get lost in Mike’s breathing again while dragging his fingertips up and down the boy’s arm—down to his wrist, up to his shoulder...down to his wrist, back up to his shoulder. Down to his...

Fresh bruises.

Scarlet marks wrapped themselves around Mike’s thin wrist, the shapes of fingers. Angry and sore.

Richie sat up so quickly that Mike flinched away from him, holding both his arms to his chest protectively.

“What?” He whimpered, big eyes staring at Richie fearfully.

“What happened to your arm?” Richie asked, reaching for Mike’s wrist only to have the boy flinch away.

“Arm?” He said, blinking as his fingers wrapped around his marks—trying to hide them.

“Did I do that?” Richie asked, thinking back to their kiss. Had he grabbed him by his arm to pull him in? Did he really grab Mike *that hard*?

“N-No. No—I fell. I... I tripped.”

"I'm not buying that," Richie said, knowing it was a lie without even having to take Mike's inability to make eye contact into consideration. "What happened? What did I do?"

"No—No, I-I really fell. I just fell."

Fuck, if Mike wasn't telling him, that *had* to mean he'd done it. But how? Those bruises were dark. He'd never hurt any of his partners—not a single one. No matter how bad she might've been asking for it. Even the one girl he dated who repeatedly hit him in the face for no goddamned reason ever felt the force of his anger physically. He screamed at her, but he never hit her. How could he have let himself do this to *Mike*?

"I'm not buying that—it's bullshit," Richie said, reaching out and pulling Mike's injured wrist into his hands. The marks lined up with his fingers. Mike could see it to. "What did I do? Did—Did... Was it... Was it when I kissed you? Did I grab you? I don't remember," he said, feeling his stomach drop.

"It wasn't you! I fell—"

"Down the stairs and I grabbed you by your fucking arm? What is this?" Richie asked, letting Mike yank his hand away.

"It was Bill, okay? Please—Please, it was my fault. I-I pulled away. I pulled away from him and—and he didn't let go and... I pulled away. It was my fault. It wasn't you. Please, please, it wasn't you," Mike said, his breaths sharp as he rubbed his bruised wrist with the hand wrapped in a cast.

He was already battered and torn to pieces and fucking *Bill* had put hands on him?

"I'm sorry—I'm sorry, Richie. You were asleep. I couldn't tell you. I swear nothing happened. He was just mad. He was just mad and he grabbed me—it wasn't like that. I swear. I *swear*."

"Stop talking," Richie said, staring at the bruises. Red, little crimson dots of blood where the vessels burst near the surface. Bill grabbed him hard enough to do *that*? Was he *trying* to break his other arm!?

“I’m sorry. Richie, please. I’m sorry.”

Why the fuck was Mike apologizing? Why was he acting like Richie was about to beat the shit out of him? Fuck, he looked like he was about to start crying.

“What did he do?” Richie asked, trying to keep his rage from showing on his face.

“Nothing—We didn’t do anything. I promise. I promise—I wouldn’t cheat on you.”

“I don’t fucking think you cheated! Do you hear yourself right now? I think that asshole tried to break your arm and I want to know why.”

Mike wasn’t going to be able to tell him why, Richie realized. All Mike could do was stammer out apologies and look at Richie like he was expecting a slap across the face at any minute.

“You stay here, okay?” Richie said, getting up from the bed and going to find a shirt in his closet.

“Richie—”

“Stay put. I’m not going to have someone in my house putting hands on you. I brought you here *specifically* so that wouldn’t fucking happen.”

“It’s my fault!”

“It’s not your fault! And I’m going to fucking kill Bill—Volumes one and two!”

“Richie, please—please, don’t! It was my fault!”

“No—No, it was not your fault. Stop saying that. Stop talking,” Richie said, pulling on more clothes and then going over to the bed to press a kiss to Mike’s cheek. “It was not your fault. I don’t know what happened and I don’t care. He hurt you—”

“No. Really, I—”

“No,” Richie said, kissing the corner of Mike’s mouth, lingering there until the boy quit trying to form apologies. “Stay up here. I’m going to go talk to him. Are you alright? Did he hurt you anywhere else?”

“I’m fine,” Mike said, not looking him in the eye. He was still rubbing at his wrist, looking like he wanted to cry.

“Are you sure?”

“Can’t you just stay here? Please?... I-It doesn’t matter. I’m fine.”

“I’ll be right back. I just want to talk to him—” It was a lie and they both knew it. “—and then I’ll come back and we go back to sleep. Okay?”

Mike managed a soft mumble in reply, then started pulling his sweater back on. He made sure to pull the sleeves down over his hands, hiding his bruises even as Richie left him in the bedroom alone.

The fact that he was definitely still drunk only vaguely resonated with Richie as he stomped down his staircase, his hands slapping at the walls to brace him as he tottered unsteadily on his feet. He could hear voices, all cheerful and merry, bubbling up from his kitchen along with the smell of coffee.

Coffee itself sounded pretty fucking good right about now, but even that wasn’t enough to cut through the haze of anger that had Richie seeing red. Those bruises—those hideous, bright crimson blotches wrapped around Mike’s arm—taunted him. They sneered at him. *You didn’t keep him safe*, they said. *You didn’t protect him*.

“He’s alive!” Mike Hanlon called, laughing until he noticed the look in Richie’s eyes. Everyone in the kitchen went silent, Beverly even seeming to shrink back behind Ben who was cradling a chipped coffee mug that hadn’t been chipped the last time Richie used it. “Is something the matter?”

Before Richie could even answer, Bill was already stepping forward, his hands raised as if in surrender.

“Look, I’m sorry—I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

“Did you even *see* what you did to him?” Richie snapped.

“I didn’t—”

“His *arm*, Bill!” Richie said, gesturing to his own wrist. “Were you trying to break it!? What’s the matter with you?”

“I got worked up,” Bill said, as if that were any kind of excuse. Richie wanted so badly to punch him, to shove him to the ground and make him feel as small as Mike had been made to feel for who knows how long. “I shouldn’t have touched him. I know that now—I was drunk. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Is Mike okay, Richie?” Bev asked, butting in where she didn’t belong.

“No! No, he’s not okay! I brought him here to keep him safe—”

“Richie, I’m *sorry*,” Bill said. Perhaps he sounded genuine, maybe he even looked it, but Richie couldn’t find the willpower to calm himself down. He brought Mike home promising he wouldn’t get hurt again, reassuring him that everything would be fine—that Richie would keep him protected. Not even twenty-four hours in and Bill had put bruises on him. “I’ll make it up to him—”

“How? How could you *possibly* make it up to him? He knows you hate him—”

“I don’t hate him,” Bill said, starting to sound more defensive than sorry. “I was worried about *you*, Richie. I don’t want some kid coming in here and taking *advantage* of you.”

“I asked him to come here! I *made* him come here with me! I promised him he’d be safe and that no one would put their fucking hands on him again, and then you went and did anyway!”

“And I keep telling you I’m sorry! I don’t know what else you want me to say!”

“Richie, I really don’t think—”

“Mike, you stay out of this,” Richie said, glaring at his friend who

shook his head with disappointment.

“If you want to blame someone, Richie, why don’t you look in the damned mirror?” Bill snapped.

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like, asshole.”

“Bill, don’t,” Beverly tried to interject, only to have Bill speak over her.

“No, no, no. He needs to hear it! You’re the one who got so wasted he couldn’t even see straight—”

“Oh, so it’s my fault you put your fucking *hands on him* because I got drunk in *my own goddamned house!*?”

“Maybe if you weren’t pissed drunk all the time, you could see that he’s a fucking con! The kid’s conning you!”

“He’s fucking abused! You’ve seen him! This has nothing to do with me drinking *in my own house!*”

“Enough! Alright, that’s enough!” Ben yelled, getting between them as if they’d lunged for one another. “This isn’t helping. Mike can *hear* you, okay? You know that. I don’t know what he’s been through, but hearing you two trying to kill each other isn’t helping anything. Bill shouldn’t have touched him. He knows it, you know it. Mike, I hope, knows that—”

“He doesn’t,” Richie snapped, glaring through Ben at Bill who rolled his eyes. He thought this whole thing was absurd. He was so caught up in his perfect little world that he couldn’t even fathom a person like Mike existing—and that’s what made Richie so angry.

When did poor, stuttering B-B-Billy forget what it felt like to be on the receiving end of a bully’s cruelty? When had he lost his empathy?

“He—He doesn’t?” Ben stammered, looking taken aback. “What do you—”

"He thinks it's his fault," Beverly said, sounding as sad as they all should be. She shouldn't be the only one who understood.

"Oh, come on—"

"Bill, this is serious," Bev said, giving him some kind of look that got him to finally shut his mouth. "You've seen that poor boy. Someone hurt him. Someone's *been* hurting him—"

"Who's to say he didn't do it to himself to con some rich idiot into taking—"

"He's not faking this!"

"—him in so he can—"

"I asked him to come here!"

"—blackmail him later!"

"I watched it happen! You fucking asshole, I *watched* it happen! He isn't making this up! He's not some con artist! He's a fucking kid!"

"Exactly! He's a *kid*! Why are you *fucking* him!?"

"Yeah, way to change the fucking subject, fucking prick," Richie growled.

"Guys! This isn't *helping*!" Ben shouted. "Bill, just drop it, man. You're not getting anywhere. It's—It's Richie's house. It's Richie's life."

"Yeah, it is," Bill snapped, glaring back at Richie with more hate than compassion. With friends like him, who needed enemies? "So I guess I should just let him throw it away if he wants."

"If you don't like it, get the fuck out of my house."

"Enough! Stop. We're not going to spend the whole week fighting. Bill, it's Richie's life. Richie, Bill is sorry and he's not going to touch Mike again. Okay? Can we just call it even? Please? For everyone's sake?"

“Fine,” Bill spat, then after a moment, repeated it with a little less venom. “Fine. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have touched him. I was just worried about you, you moron. Thought you picked up some junkie off the street. You won’t tell us anything about him. What was I supposed to think?”

“I can take care of myself. I have been for a good two decades now, got it? I don’t need a fucking babysitter.”

Bill responded with some colorful stream of language that Richie only half listened to as he moved around Ben to get to the coffee pot. There was just enough to make a cup for himself—thank God for small miracles—and as he was adding sugar, he wondered if Mike would want some. Was he a coffee drinker? He seemed to like soda... There was some Pepsi left downstairs in the bar fridge. He’d have to go upstairs to ask.

God, he wasn’t looking forward to going back up there and explaining that despite all the shouting, everything was fine—he didn’t need to feel guilty. Shit, he was going to feel guilty anyway. That was the only emotion the kid seemed capable of half the time.

“Richie, how is Mike?” Beverly was asking again, her hand on Richie’s shoulder. It took a lot of self-control not to shrug her off. She wasn’t the one he was angry with. It wasn’t her fault Bill was a prick.

“He’s upset and he’s in pain. Slept with the lights on... I don’t even know if he really got any sleep.”

“Do you want me to put on some more coffee? Is he getting up or...?”

“I was going to check on him and see. I don’t know if he drinks coffee. I don’t know... I don’t fucking know.”

Bill and Ben had wandered off into the living room where the television started blaring out the news, and then the sports recap. Even without turning around Richie could feel Mike Hanlon’s eyes on him.

“Besides the obvious, how are *you* feeling this morning?” Mike asked. “We thought we’d need to call the squad for you last night. Seems

you wanted to relive your college days.”

“Yeah, I knew that last keg stand was a bad idea,” Richie replied automatically, taking a sip of the warm coffee and trying to force himself to relax.

“Did you sleep alright?”

“Well, I didn’t choke to death on my own vomit. So I guess that’s a win.” He felt himself bristling at them and fought hard to bite it back. It wasn’t Bev and Mike who had angered him. They weren’t the ones accusing Mike of all sorts of nonsense. They were the two who had been nicest to him—so why couldn’t he just relax? Richie found himself still on the defensive, waiting for an attack that wasn’t going to come. “Guest room okay?” He asked Beverly.

“Oh, yes! The view is incredible. Like a luxury hotel,” she was smiling at him around the rim of her own coffee mug, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“I can’t say the same, but the couch wasn’t uncomfortable,” Mike said, chuckling softly.

“Kick Bill out of the downstairs guest room and make him sleep on the couch. Not much of a view, but I’d rather you have the bed than him.”

“I don’t mind it,” Mike said. “Whole floor to myself—access to the liquor bar. What’s there to complain about?”

“I like your thinking,” Richie said, nodding before taking another mouthful of coffee.

They delved into a half-hearted discussion of their plans for the day. Beverly had her heart set on trying some restaurant she’d gotten reservations for first thing in the morning (did these people ever sleep?) and Mike had a few historical sites he wanted to check out. Ben passively agreed with whatever plan was mentioned as he came in to start a fresh pot of coffee (still no explanation for his chipped mug), and Bill offered no comments on any of it until the plans were solidified.

"Is Mike coming too? You know, *Mike*," he said, gesturing to the ceiling.

"Probably not," Richie said.

"What, he's afraid of me now?" Bill asked, sounding both defensive and resigned.

"His face is fucked up. He doesn't want to go out with his face all fucked up. Can you blame him?"

Beverly looked at Richie for a moment like she wanted to say something, then seemed to swallow her words down with a mouthful of coffee.

"You said... You said you saw that happen to him?" Bill asked.

"Well, don't get all curious now, Bill," Richie answered. "You'll spoil the big reveal."

"The big reveal? What, like he's some kind of mutant or something?"

"Yeah, I have superpowers," Mike said, sending a bolt of ice down Richie's spine. How long had he been standing in the doorway? What had he heard? What *hadn't* he heard?

"Oh, yeah?" Bill asked, his tone of voice matching Richie's unease. "And what's that?"

"Ability to piss off anyone in a five foot radius just by existing. And I can sense when there's coffee."

"Well, those powers are lame," Richie blurted out, immediately setting his cup down to fumble for a fresh mug for Mike. "You wouldn't stand a chance against Thanos. Cream or sugar?"

"Richie, your cream expired a month ago," Beverly offered helpfully.

"Add grocery store to our list of sights to see, got it," Richie said.

"Sugar's fine," Mike said, sliding past Beverly and Ben to stand next to Richie at the counter. He was dressed in a long sleeved shirt and

one of Richie's hoodies—way overkill for the air conditioned temperature of the condo, but it hid the majority of his bruises and when he had the hood pulled forward, he could hide the one on his jaw perfectly. He was way too used to dressing himself to accommodate those marks. Didn't the others see it, too?

"Did you get much sleep?" Mike Hanlon asked him, his friendly tone somehow working to keep Mike comfortable with him—just as it had the night before. Richie was seriously impressed at his friend's ability to connect with Mike so quickly. Maybe it was because they had the same name...

Richie had a feeling if he stepped away long enough to go to the bathroom, the next thing he'd know, the two of them would be planning out a trip to Mordor together.

"Some. Hand hurts—"

"Did you take your meds?" Richie asked, handing Mike his coffee mug.

"Yeah. Thanks," Mike smiled at him, looking timid and gentle as he accepted the cup. His sleeves were pulled down to cover his hands all the way to his mid-palms, covering his cast and covering the marks Bill left on him.

"We were talking about going sight-seeing today," Mike Hanlon said, taking Mike's attention back away from Richie who tried not to be jealous. "If you wanted to join us."

"I-I can't," Mike said, ducking his head as he took a sip of scalding hot coffee.

"Enough sugar?" Richie asked.

"It's fine," Mike said, smiling again—making eye contact as he did.

"Surely you could join us. We're planning to take Richie's convertible and an Uber. There's room," Mike Hanlon insisted.

"I can't," Mike repeated, pushing further into Richie's side.

“Well, you can’t just stay here by yourself,” Bill said, earning a quick, warning glance from Richie.

“I gave him the schedule for the Skinemax channel. He wants left alone,” Richie said, forcing out a joke so he wouldn’t force his fist down Bill’s throat.

“Gross,” Mike whispered, taking another drink of coffee before sliding past him, sliding past Beverly and Ben, and going back upstairs.

“Nice going,” Richie muttered.

“What, you really want to just leave him here?” Bill asked. “You’re going to be a nervous wreck the whole time.”

“Bullshit. I’ll be fine. If he runs off, he runs off.”

“Richie’ll be texting him under the table at lunch, I bet you anything,” Ben offered.

The comment made Richie’s stomach drop. Mike didn’t have a phone—how was he going to check in on him if he didn’t have a phone? He guessed he didn’t really need to. Mike would probably enjoy the privacy after being crammed into Richie’s space for the past three days. At the very least, it’d give him a chance to de-stress and get his bearings without Richie and four other people asking him if he was alright every two minutes.

“He doesn’t have a phone,” Richie said, emptying the coffee filter just to have something to do with his hands.

“He doesn’t have a phone?” Bill asked.

“No. He wasn’t allowed to. So no, I won’t be texting him under the table.”

“Doesn’t have a phone?” Mike Hanlon echoed.

“No. The fucker he lived with did a good job keeping him all to himself. Can we talk about literally fucking anything else?” By the time Richie could properly nurse his cup of coffee, it had long since

gone cold.

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If the other members of Richie's so called "Losers' Club" weren't fed up with Mike's presence the night before, they certainly were by the time Richie finally let them all leave to start their day of touring. He gave Mike his tablet and gave this whole nervous spiel about logging into Facebook, adding him on Facebook, *we can talk on Facebook just like text so if you need anything, I'll know.*

Truthfully, Mike didn't want to log into any of his social media accounts, but if this was the one demand Richie had of him—wanting to stay in touch while he was out of the house—then who was Mike to say no? It wasn't a big request... He could see why Richie didn't think twice about asking. Besides his nerves, which could very well just be him coming down from being drunk still, Richie almost seemed excited about it. Like he'd had the most brilliant idea ever and was proud of himself for coming up with it. Kind of like the time Mike's mom learned she could voice-to-text, only...cute.

"See, if you log in, I can add you on my account—like, my actual one. Not the one Seema runs," Richie said, showing off his two separate accounts on his *two* separate phones. "Seema's my social media director. She makes all of my posts for me—I mean, I make some. Just not all of them." On and on like a babbling brook, or a car wreck. Mike wasn't sure yet, but it was amusing and still kind of... cute to see him doing a show-and-tell of his career's inner workings.

So, for the first time in almost a year, Mike logged into his Facebook after guessing the password right on the third try. He had so many notifications it made him sick to his stomach, and Richie's incoming friend request was one of a dozen. His incoming message, one of many—the little red bubble climbing higher and higher in number as his profile showed the first signs of activity in months. Mike tried to ignore it as he clicked on Richie's chat bubble and sent him a thumbs-up emoji from beside him on the bed.

Richie was reluctant to leave, even after they'd sent three messages back and forth—as if he thought Mike would suddenly forget how to text in his absence. He had an arm around Mike's waist, his chin on

his shoulder—not so much reading over it and looking at his tablet screen as just...cuddling. It was nice. It was *different*. It filled Mike with hope that once Richie's friends were gone, back where they came from, this was how it would be every day. Just them together—being close.

And then Richie saying goodbye and kissing him awkwardly on the cheek as he left, as if he forgot they were okay to kiss on the mouth. And then Mike was alone with the tablet and the steadily increasing number of notifications.

Jordan. Jordan. Lucas. Jordan, Jordan, Jordan, Jordan. Message after message after message popping up.

The door downstairs closed. Mike heard the garage door open, then close, then silence. Dead silence as more messages poured in that he struggled to ignore.

He checked his feed, seeing posts of his friends with people he'd never even heard of or seen before. His mother had been sharing recipes and memes warning that Facebook would take ownership of all her photos if she didn't post the following message. Nancy was apparently engaged...

Engaged.

Mike felt tears prick at his eyes, but was determined to ignore them. So he'd missed an engagement—so what? It wasn't like he missed the whole wedding.

Why would she want you at her wedding? Jordan's voice hissed in the back of his head.

With her engagement, she shared photos of dresses and cakes and venues they could never possibly afford. Jonathan shared photos of all kinds of things—mostly of Nancy, but other things too.

Mike lost track of time just scrolling through months' and months' worth of posts while chat notifications flashed across the top of his screen. Lucas, Dustin, Jordan, Lucas, Jordan, Jordan, Jordan...

Then he clicked over into his own feed, planning to change his

relationship status and begin the process of unfriending Jordan and everyone he'd brought with him. Instead, he became caught up in the posts he found, mostly sent by Jordan and his friends. His heart hammered in his chest as he stared at the posts, all having started the day Richie had pulled him out of that awful hell hole. Posts about drug addiction, posts about Mike "really needing to get help," Jordan acting as if Mike had *gone missing*. People posted to his wall accusing him of stealing from them, implying that he'd taken medications from their grandparents—every type of slander possible that Mike had been defenseless against without access to a phone or laptop.

Deleting the posts and all of the things Jordan had *ever* shared to his wall took close to an hour, and every few minutes a new one would pop up until Mike remembered why he clicked onto his own profile to begin with.

It took more courage than he cared to admit to block Jordan, finally silencing the notifications at the top of his screen. He felt neither relief nor anguish—just a strange numbness in place of a dull ache. Unfriending Jordan's crew of people was quick work, and before long he'd thinned his friends list down to about thirty or so people he actually knew and wanted to talk with. By that time the only posts on his wall pertained to an old DnD campaign that Jordan had cut short and Mike had never gotten to finish.

Another hour ticked past as he deleted photos—deleted anything that showed Jordan or his house or his friends until at last every bit of him was gone, gone, gone.

By that time, the sleeve of the hoodie he'd borrowed from Richie's closet was soaked in tears and snot—and that was before he'd clicked on his unread messages.

Nothing new from Richie, but that was to be expected. Mike tried not to let the fleeting spurt of panic take hold of him when his last message (an emoji, really) went unread and unanswered. For the time being, Mike ignored Jordan's messages at the top of the list, the final one he sent boasting a preview of "I told everyone what a...", and looked at Lucas' and Dustin's.

"Are you really back from..." from Lucas.

“Blink twice if you need help...” from Dustin.

Beneath them were old, unread messages from his mother and Nancy, Jonathan, his mother, Will...

El.

His chest clenched at the sight of her name on his screen, the tiny circle of her profile photo forcing more tears down his cheeks.

“Hope everything is OK.” Her message read. Mike hesitated to click on it, wondering how Richie would feel about it if he did. El wasn’t just one of his friends that Richie encouraged him to speak to. She was *the* friend. The *ex*. The one he wanted and couldn’t have... Richie knew that.

Richie would be so angry if he knew Mike tried to talk to her...

So he forced himself to click on an older message from Will—from a couple months back, wishing him well even though he wasn’t online to see. It felt easier, safer somehow, than answering Lucas or Dustin who were active and awaiting a reply.

Mike wrote him an apology for being gone so long, and asked if he’d been able to play DnD with anyone—either online or in person. He didn’t expect a quick reply, but he stared at the screen regardless, tapping it whenever it would start to time out until a check mark appeared beside his message and Will began typing.

He asked if Mike was okay, if he was still at Jordan’s house or if he’d moved back home.

“Not with Jordan. Not at home either.” He didn’t feel like it was a good idea to explain what happened with Richie, at least not so soon. When he thought it over now, with the pleasant thrum of pain meds in his veins, with no Richie around to distract him, he started to realize how absurd it all sounded. How would he even explain it without sounding...stupid.

Oh, yeah, I ran away from Jordan when we were in the city to go shopping and met this comedian—he’s kinda famous. We went to bed together and now I live with him in LA. Oh, and he watched Jordan

bash my head in.

That would go over *great*.

“Oh... Are you safe?” Will asked, immediately following it up with, “Not in the Upside Down?”

“Not in the Upside Down but it kind of feels like it.”

“Safe???”

“Safe,” Mike said, trying to let the meaning of that word sink in. Safe, he thought, rubbing at his wrist where Bill had bruised him. He *was* safe, wasn’t he? After all, he was living with Richie and Richie hadn’t ever once showed hostility towards him.

“Not going to go MIA again?”

“I had to get you back for vanishing. Now you know how it feels,” Mike said, sending a tongue-out emoji.

“Now YOU know how it feels...” Will answered, no emoji to soften the blow.

Mike’s hope that things could go back to the way they had been started trickling away, leaving him feeling little beyond that numbness...emptiness. Will was angry at him—all his friends would be. His parents would be. Nancy, too. Now that he was back, they could express their disdain, their disappointment in his lack of judgment. It was entirely, one hundred percent his fault for everything that had happened with Jordan. Everyone knew it. Whether or not they all believed the lies Jordan was spreading about drug use and addiction and *theft*, they would still know it was his own fault.

Will sent something else, but Mike didn’t read it. He chose, instead, to back out of the messages. Richie’s name was back at the top of his list with “sent a photo” as his message preview.

Richie was the only person in the world who didn’t blame him for what Jordan had done.

Mike clicked on his message without a second thought.

It was a picture of food—a really juicy looking burger with fries seasoned to the point they looked red in the dim light.

Mike wiped his nose on his still-damp sleeve and sent a drooling emoji.

“That’s what I thought. Sent some for you. DoorDash! Do you have that in Indy? You need to eat.”

“Thanks Mom. Will do,” Mike said, his stomach twisting as soon as he hit the send button. He must’ve forgotten who he was talking to. How could he let himself respond to Richie like that just because Wil was pissed at him? Mike was expecting anger or annoyance from Richie, directed at Mike’s dismissal of his generosity.

Instead, he got three laughing-crying emojis and a quick, “As long as you don’t start calling me Daddy.”

“Grandpa?”

A shocked emoji followed by a broken heart, each in their own chat bubbles.

“I thought I was hip with the kiddos. Now you got me doubtin. Fr Fr. Wtf. YOLO on fleek. I’m finna cry.” And then, a moment later, as Mike was still typing his message, “Bev says hi and to put my phone away. Mom is mean.” And then another message, “Your DoorDash arrives!”

“I didn’t know you were a novelist too,” Mike sent, more amused than annoyed at his inability to write and send a message before Richie changed the subject on him again and again. “Thank you for food!!”

And, true to Richie’s word, the doorbell rang a few moments later. Had he ordered it at the same time he got to the restaurant? It felt strange to be more than an afterthought... Mike had expected Richie to bring him something home to eat even though there was more than enough leftover pizza and garlic bread in the fridge from the night before. Never in his wildest dreams would he have expected

Richie to get to a restaurant while out with his friends and send delivery to him back at the house before even getting his own plate. It was like... In a way, it was like he was at the table with them.

Mike ate his food at the bar in the kitchen, keeping his eye on the tablet where messages from Will had stopped. He wondered if Richie would text him again before coming home, but tried not to let himself become needy—as if he needed to prove to someone inside the empty house that he wasn't getting dependent on Richie's attention. He ate his meal and washed it down with Pepsi from the downstairs bar, then cleared away his trash before gathering the plates and cups from the night before along with everyone's coffee mugs from that morning. He rinsed them and loaded the dishwasher, got it running and then started cleaning up the kitchen with the supplies he could find. At least if everyone got home to see he'd completed some chores, they wouldn't think of him as a leech... And, for his own peace of mind, he wouldn't feel like a burden.

After a while, he found a vacuum and was able to sweep up the crumbs and dirt in the basement. He took a break to play a few rounds of pinball, then found himself wandering out the sliding glass door to the pool. Immediately, the heat struck him and almost found himself rolling up his sleeves. He settled for taking off his socks, frowning at the greenish bruises on the tops of his feet as he stepped over to the pool and sat down with his feet in the chilly water.

The sky above was so clear, and all around Mike could hear the sounds of traffic and distant voices all swirling together. It was refreshing over the silence of Hawkins—over the quiet of Jordan's little suburb. If he screamed here, someone might hear him. Someone might call for help... Especially in such a close and affluent neighborhood—even if it was just to file a noise complaint.

Mike waved his feet back and forth in the water and sent a picture to Richie before laying back on the hot pavement. His eyes slipped closed as he felt the sunlight on his face. Sunscreen, he thought, might be a good thing to look for if he came outside again. Maybe while Richie was out with his friends tomorrow, Mike might try to swim a little bit (or as much as he could manage with his hand in a cast) in the privacy of the fenced off yard. No one would see him and it might do his flesh some good to actually be exposed to the

sunlight. Did sunlight help with bruises?

He'd have to look that up later and see. For now, he just wanted to enjoy the warmth and the feeling of cool water on his feet. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd felt so relaxed and comfortable. Richie wasn't going to come barging in, angry at him for laying down. Richie wasn't going to beat him for wasting time by the pool.

Maybe someday soon, he and Richie could sit out here together. Maybe lay side by side in the pool chairs or on towels. Mike liked the idea of laying next to him here, warm in the sunlight, maybe with the older man's fingers carding through his hair. It would be so nice... Mike wanted that.

Oh, wouldn't it be nice to just lay by the pool in the moonlight too?

Little fantasies played through Mike's head as he laid with his feet in the water. Some more steamy than others. He couldn't wait for Richie's friends to leave so they could have the condo and all its many rooms and beds and surfaces to themselves. It was going to be absolutely *wonderful*.

8. Chapter 8

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so, so much for your consistent reviews and messages! I love them all so much and am so, so happy you like my story! Another long chapter because I have no self control when I write scenes. Also, though I've reviewed several times, censored curse words might reappear in this chapter, but hopefully not. Need to stop writing on the work PC! Thank you so much and hope you enjoy!

It seemed as if his friends were trying just the slightest bit harder today—or perhaps they were just on their best behavior because they were all out in public. They didn't bring up Mike, not even Bill, and for a while it felt almost normal. It felt like their last reunion, only slightly more jovial. At least as far as the others were concerned. Richie wasn't in the best of moods and never would be for these annual get-togethers. This celebration of life thing wasn't exactly easy for him to grasp.

At least things for Richie were a lot quieter here in LA than they had been while out on the road. People were used to seeing him. Well, correction, people were used to seeing celebrities in LA, celebrities with a lot more status and power and good looks than him. Out here, he was just another man out on the town with a group of other beautiful rich people who fit right in. No one asking for autographs, no one passing him shocked and delighted glances. He felt like he could relax when he walked the streets of LA. He wasn't looking over his shoulder for the next rabid fan or heckler.

Bev was getting a lot of looks, though, and Ben had been mistaken for some man in an action movie by a fan who didn't want to take "I'm sorry, but you're mistaken" for an answer. That was a hilarious mix-up that, thirty years ago, would have served as a punchline for one of Richie's less sensitive jokes. "Yeah, Haystack, one day they're going to be mistaking you for a Hollywood hottie," har har har.

They visited one of Beverly's stores, surprising the staff there who all

scrambled to hug her and take photos. Richie, who had never set foot inside a store of Beverly's old brand or her new one since leaving her ex-husband, felt immensely out of place. The clothes were too pristine, too nice... Bright patterns, sophisticated cuts.

"Would it kill you to get some Hawaiian shirts in here?" He asked, earning a horrified look from the sales attendant. "Some cargo shorts?"

"Sure, Richie. Maybe with our next summer line," Bev answered, winking at him while she simultaneously fussed over the draping of a black, furry coat on a mannequin.

Bill joked about ducking into a bookstore to sign a few copies of his novels, Ben mentioned wanting to show off a few of the buildings he'd designed in town. Mike Hanlon was happily along for the ride, mentioning Stan and Eddie so often it started to feel forced.

They weren't here. Why was everyone still trying to make it seem like they were? Eddie was gone. Eddie was dead. Was it really so bad that Richie didn't want to think about it anymore? It was; he knew it was bad. So that was why he would chime in, crack jokes like his heart wasn't bleeding, and keep on a happy face so his friends would think nothing had changed with him besides his stowaway back at the condo.

Yet, whenever the conversation would turn back to Eddie or Stan, wherever the Losers happened to be, Richie would sneak out his phone and start texting Mike. After he'd sent Mike food and had a couple of drinks, their conversations started to flow more naturally as the evening bled on. Mike sent a photo of his feet in the pool—the ripples in the teal-colored water hiding the bruises Richie knew were there.

What had that creep done to him to get bruises in half the places he did? His face was obviously from getting punched and slapped, his throat from being choked, his arms from being grabbed, his back down to his thighs probably from that fucking broomstick Mike referred to as the cane, but his calves? His shins? The tops of his feet? And Mike stayed there and put up with it...

Richie found himself passing a look to Beverly down the long bar they'd ended up at for pre-dinner drinks. She'd stayed with someone kind of like that... Could he ask her why? Was that appropriate?

He knew the basics. He knew how people got into their victims' heads and kept them beaten down, but Mike seemed so smart. *Beverly* was so smart and beautiful and charming. She could've had anyone, and yet she'd married that creep. What made such incredible people fall into those monsters' traps? If someone raised their fist to Richie, he was *going* to punch them back. He couldn't just stand there and take it. He didn't see himself as a particularly strong person or a particularly brave one, so why wasn't he the one getting beaten down? He was the one with the smart mouth who didn't know when to shut up—so why wasn't he trapped by some creep instead of Mike or Bev?

It bothered him more than it should have, and maybe a bit more than it would if he could actually get drunk instead of just sipping on a beer because he was everyone's ride home.

"You alright, Rich?" Bill called from two stools over at the bar.

"Yeah... I can't get over how much that black fur coat at Bev's store reminds me of Mrs. K's—"

"No! Please, do not finish that sentence," Ben shouted, laughing raucously because the lucky bastard was on his third beer.

"Beep-Beep, Richie," Bev said, hiding her reddened face in her hands. She would never look at that coat the same way again, and Richie was somewhat proud of it.

Richie was smiling to himself still as he glanced down at his phone, another message from Mike flashing at the top of his screen. Mike was trying to beat Richie's score in Pac Man and would update him whenever his score crept a little higher. He finally seemed to be relaxing and that put Richie at ease as well. Maybe some time to himself in the condo wasn't such a bad thing. Richie had been worried he'd feel abandoned or nervous, but it seemed the alone time had given him a chance to decompress—or at least he was making it seem that way. For all Richie knew, the kid could have spent the

whole day crying and was making up everything he didn't document in pictures.

"You really couldn't find a *single* woman out here for you, Richie?" Bill asked, suddenly standing next to Richie's stool at the bar.

"What?" He asked, hiding his phone like he'd been caught. "What do you mean?"

"All these years and you never married. These women are stunning. Have you even looked around?"

Richie gave the bar a quick once over. A group of college-age girls were giggling together by the windows, posing for a photo. Some housewives in fancy blouses were sipping martinis. A high-end prostitute was working the last stool at the bar, and Beverly was chatting with the bartender about international travel. As far as Richie was concerned, she was the only one worth talking to.

"Well, there aren't any ten-year-olds so it's not really my scene, is it?" Richie asked, sounding more bitter than he'd intended.

"I'm not trying to get on your case, man. I'm just asking—you never even tried to get married?"

"I got cheated on a lot, I cheated a lot, I'm on the road eight months of the year. Not really the best for family planning." He glanced instinctively down at his phone, as if in fear that his words would somehow voice-to-text themselves to Mike who didn't need to hear all of that. At the mention of cheating, the kid was likely to spontaneously combust.

How the fuck had he jumped to the conclusion that Richie thought the bruises Bill left on him were from cheating? What the fuck had Jordan *done* to his brain?

"I can see that making things difficult. Can't start a family from out on the road. I just always thought you talked the talk so much that you'd be the first of us to end up settled down—or at least wind up with a kid."

"Nope. No luck in that department," Richie said. And then, to

himself, thought: *Maybe it's the fact I like men, fucker.*

"Mike doing okay?" Bill asked, meeting Richie's gaze when he looked up from his phone.

"He's fine. Hasn't burned the house down or sold off all my belongings for drugs yet, so I think we're good."

Bill, for once, started to look ashamed. Like he was finally realizing just how out-of-line he was to think he had a right to talk about Mike at all, let alone yell at him and put hands on him.

"Rich?" It was Ben now, and Richie knew exactly where this was going to lead. Right back into a discussion he promised Mike he wouldn't have. Ben must've seen his unwillingness to speak on the subject on his face, because whatever he'd been planning to ask fizzled into silence.

"I just want to know," Beverly said, "was it a partner or his parents?"

"Could've been both. I don't know. Definitely one of the two," Richie said, feeling that she of all people understood. She had to understand his want of privacy; on some level, she had to understand the position Richie was in, too.

"Well, he's lucky you came along," Mike Hanlon said, raising his glass as if for a toast. "I think he'll be feeling more like himself in no time."

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

Richie didn't know why the words put him on the defensive all the way through dinner. It was stupid... He *wanted* Mike to come into himself. He wanted him to be more comfortable and happy, that was why he took him in. So why did it sound so threatening when it came from someone else's mouth?

The thought had him throwing more alcohol than he needed into his cart when they closed off their night with a trip to the grocery store.

More coffee, good cream, some random bits of food he managed to get Mike to admit that he liked and wanted, and booze. It didn't go

unnoticed by his friends, not by a longshot, but they all seemed well enough aware not to bring it up.

That being said, Richie was still on edge when he found himself standing alone next to Beverly in the produce aisle which he'd had to come back to a third time because Mike admitted he didn't really *want* oranges, he wanted bananas. Why it was so hard for him to just say what *fruit* he wanted in particular besides just saying "fruit would be nice," was beyond Richie's ability to comprehend—and his patience was wearing thin all around.

"Can I ask you something?" Richie said, staring at the bunches of bananas as if they would have an answer while Beverly, beside him, fawned over some weird, exotic fruit.

"Of course." She kept her tone pleasant and gentle, as if he were going to ask about her fashion line or where her sandals came from.

"What makes a person... What makes someone smart like Mike or like you end up with creeps who beat the shit out of them?"

"It just depends, I guess," she said, turning the reddish fruit over in her hands, not looking at Richie any more than he was looking at her. "For me... It felt natural. Normal. At first, Tom was like... Tom was charming and charismatic—he offered me more things than I could ever possibly want. Things I didn't think I deserved. And he made me feel like I was special, like there must be something good he saw in me that no one else did. Or would... I don't know. But I felt lucky that he noticed me. And then we married and he...changed. One day he hit me and it was like I was a little kid again, tiptoeing around my dad. Fell back into old patterns, old habits. It's not so hard to believe that your husband wants to beat you when your father always did."

She was quiet a moment and Richie wanted to apologize for bringing it up at all. It wasn't like she'd never explained it to them before and he didn't want her to think he hadn't paid attention the first time she confessed this to them as a group—but it held a different weight now. He didn't want to pry, but he needed to understand.

Was it selfish? Was it selfish of him to want to know more now

because he thought it would help Mike when he should have been more curious before when Beverly was going through her nasty divorce?

“I was used to living in a warzone. I was used to everything being my fault, so when Tom changed... I felt like it was because of me. *I’d done it. I made him angry. I made him change.* I spent all my time thinking, if I hadn’t done this or if I didn’t say that, things would’ve gone on like they were in the beginning.”

“And that was...years, right? You dated a couple of—”

“He scooped me up and I married him in eight months. He was charming and I was stupid.”

“Stupid? No. *I’m* stupid. I’m the one who kidnaps eighteen-year-olds after a one-night stand. You fell into a trap. You got played by a professional con artist.”

“Is that what you think happened to Mike?” Beverly asked, bringing the fruit in her hands to her nose and smelling it.

“Should probably buy that poor Dragon Fruit dinner after all that fingering,” Richie said, getting an unexpectedly loud laugh to burst from Beverly’s throat. She covered her mouth with her hand and then slipped the fruit into the thin plastic bag Richie held open for her. “I don’t know what happened to Mike,” he said as they moved on past the bananas to another section of produce.

“You mentioned when you and Bill were fighting that you saw him get hit.”

“I did,” Richie said, sighing. Mike asked him not to tell, and here he was, flapping his yap about everything. *Here you go, Bill,* he thought. *The reason Trashmouth can’t get married. He can’t even keep a fucking promise for more than a day.*

“Partner?”

“Partner,” Richie confirmed. “Guy beats him with a broomstick. Broke his hand right in front of me. I thought he was going to kill him. I... I thought I was going to watch him die, too.” Memories of

Eddie left down in the sewers flashed in his brain and Richie ended up grabbing four avocados he didn't want or need, just to have something to do with his hands to distract him. "I'm standing there like a fucking idiot while this guy's got Mike on the floor. Hit him in the face, hit him across the head... And Mike just laid there and said he was sorry the whole time. Didn't try to stop him, didn't try to run... I mean, he *did*. He did. At the end... He ran and I got him out, but... I just don't understand. If someone was hitting me, I'd hit back."

"He's probably tried that before and it didn't turn out so well," Bev said, rubbing Richie's shoulder gently while they both stared through the display of avocados, blocking some old woman who was circling them like a buzzard. "People like Tom, people like whoever Mike was with, they're monsters. They don't feel empathy, they don't feel sorry... They know how to play with your head and make you stay put, make you think they love you, but they don't. They can't. And somehow, they have the power to make you think it's your fault—that you're the one who can't *be* loved, or aren't worthy."

They moved on from the avocados and stared, instead, at plums.

"Does he mention his parents at all? His family?"

"Not really. I... I don't ask. Is that bad? I feel like... I feel like it's too soon? Or that I don't have the right, but... I don't know. He's private. He's very private. He doesn't even want me talking to you guys about any of this. Which is fine, I get that. I shouldn't, but I'm going out of my mind. I want to *help* him."

"And you are. You *are*. Trust me. It'll take time to get comfortable with each other. Especially given the circumstances... What happened last night with Bill, that was a step backwards, but it wasn't your fault. Mike knows that. He knows you care about him. And, yeah, it's a little strange, but as soon as I saw his face—how bruised up it is—I knew why he was with you."

"Cause he looks like my kid?" Richie offered.

"Because you're protective, too. Just like Bill." She was smiling to herself when Richie stole a glance at her, maybe remembering

something from their childhood that Richie couldn't recall. He remembered not being protective a whole shit ton of times. He remembered being scared shitless and picking a fight with Bill that almost disbanded the Losers for good.

But he also remembered sticking an ax into the back of Henry Bower's mullet-wearing fucking head...and immediately wanted to throw up his dinner. The feeling, the thick, cracking sound that had followed, resonated in his memory and made his stomach churn.

"That boy... You can tell he feels safe with you. He's always looking at you—always trying to see where you are, even if you're sitting right beside him."

"I'm the only person he knows," Richie said, even though he knew exactly what look she was talking about. Mike had a way of staring at him like he was the only person in the room, the only other person in the world. It was really no wonder why Richie had fallen for him, hook, line, and sinker. "I did punch the guy. Eventually... The one who was beating him up. I kicked his door in when I heard Mike screaming."

"And in a year or two when he's feeling more like himself, he'll tell everyone at parties about his knight in shining armor," Bev said, tugging on the sleeve of Richie's green and white Hawaiian shirt.

"You really think he'll stick around that long?" Richie asked, looking away toward the seafood department and all the fish with their gaping eyes, laid out on the ice.

"Honey, if that look's anything to go by—and assuming he's *not* your long-lost son—he's going to be attached to you at the hip until you're eighty and in a wheelchair."

"Yeah, but when he's 'more himself,' is he even going to want anything to do with me? I'm fucking old. Everyone seems to think I don't know this, but I do. I just don't care. Age is a number, all that bullshit. He's not a little kid and he doesn't *act* eighteen." He made himself feel sick, just trying to justify it. "Whatever. But he's eighteen... He's supposed to be in college chasing after hot chicks who are out of his league—or pining after the captain of the football

team. He's supposed to be getting his first apartment and staying up until three, rolling out of bed ten minutes before his first class. I'm old. I'm trying to be in bed by nine o'clock so I wake up on time to get my coffee before going into work."

"He *stares* at you, Richie."

"A lot of people stare at me. I'm a freak of nature."

"He *likes* you."

"Until one day he wakes up and he doesn't."

"In that case, why not just enjoy the time you have until then? Maybe he'll surprise you. Maybe he's more of a Stan. Old before his time."

"Stan the Man," Richie echoed, wondering for the thousandth time what he would've been like all grown up. They still hadn't made it out to meet his widow, but Mike Hanlon had dragged up a few photos of him from his obituary and social media. Same curly hair, same little smile...

"Did Mike say if he'd had anything to eat for dinner?" Bev asked as they wandered through the store, looking for the rest of the Losers.

"Leftovers. He seemed happy with it."

"I was thinking, maybe tomorrow, I could take him with me into town—"

"He won't go out with his face like that."

"I was going to say, I could take him into town to get some concealer. I'm an expert at covering bruises, you know. Black eyes... Everything. Then he could come out with us if he's feeling up to it."

"You could ask. He... He kind of knows about your situation. I told him a little. Not much, but I wanted him to know he wasn't the only one."

"You told him it wasn't Ben, right? I noticed how he shies away from him."

"I... I think I did? I don't know. I don't think he'd think it was Ben," Richie said, his mind spinning back to any encounters he could remember between the two. Mike had seemed very reluctant to shake Ben's hand, but he'd done the same to Bill. "I think he knows that. He's just intimidated by your boyfriend's rockin' bod. Seriously, we all know I was the good looking one back in the day. What the fuck happened?"

"Alcoholism," Beverly offered.

"Oh, yeah. There's that."

"You really shouldn't be letting Mike drink when he's taking medicine for his hand."

"I forgot about that," Richie said, wondering if that had somehow played into Mike falling asleep still dressed with the lights on. "It's a good thing I don't have kids. They wouldn't have made it this far."

"So he *hasn't* mentioned parents?" Bev pressed as they continued scouring the aisles.

"He said they don't want him. Or something like that. I should've asked more questions, but I was kind of focused on getting him out that guy's house as opposed to writing his memoir."

"I can see if he'll talk to me about it."

"It's not like he actively tries to avoid it. He just gets upset and we've been busy. I *did* ask if he had parents or friends before I dragged him out here."

"I know, but he might feel more comfortable with me. Because I've been there, too. And if his childhood was a lot like his relationship, I think you might need to know about it sooner rather than later. If he's only ever been hardwired to expect abuse, he won't know what to make of you being nice to him. I know I've lashed out at Ben more times than I can count for things he didn't deserve—because I was waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Near that time, they found the others and made their way to the checkout, Richie with more food and produce than he remembered

grabbing and enough booze to last him and Mike a month, at least. His friends ended up with bags in their laps as he crammed what he could into the trunk. Thankfully, it wasn't a long drive back to the condo, and with five of them working together it took no time to get the groceries inside.

"I half expected Mike to be waiting on you," Mike Hanlon said as they stepped into the suspiciously quiet condo. Richie had an odd feeling of dread when the lights were all off and Mike was nowhere to be seen.

"Kid did dishes. I'll be damned," Bill said, peering into the empty sink and then opening the dishwasher. "Kid put the dishes *away*."

"Did I not mention he was housebroken?" Richie offered, dropping his bags of groceries on the floor and then immediately moving from room to room, looking for the boy. He wasn't on the first level, and Richie hurried up the stairs, expecting that he would find Mike curled up in bed.

His bed, however, was made and empty. The black duffle bag missing from the floor where it had been the night before.

Richie fumbled for his phone while his heart pounded.

Had he run off? Why would he leave? Where would he even go? LA wasn't exactly safe at all hours of the night—even in the good neighborhoods.

The last message Mike had sent him was asking where to take the trash bag that was full. Richie had told him and never got a reply. Did he get himself locked outside?

But then where was his duffle bag?

Richie hurried back down the stairs to find Mike Hanlon coming up from the basement, smiling like he'd been told a joke.

"Fell asleep watching *Lord of the Rings*," he said, gesturing back down to the basement.

"You would find yourself another nerd," Bill said, words muffled by

the refrigerator door as he was pushing the bags of produce into the shelves.

“Well, the athlete was off the table,” Richie said, gesturing vaguely to Ben before slipping down into the basement—just to make sure Mike was there and he hadn’t been lied to.

Only after seeing Mike curled up on the couch, under a blanket he must’ve found tucked away in some closet, did Richie’s heart finally stop pounding. The television was muted, subtitles playing across the bottom of the screen as Frodo lay wrapped up in a spider’s web, paralyzed with venom.

Richie leaned down to stroke Mike’s hair, brushing it out of his face where it wasn’t buried in the bend of his arm. He thought to wake him, just so he knew Richie had come home and wouldn’t be startled if he heard voices upstairs, but decided against it. He clearly didn’t sleep well the night before and his meds probably made him tired. He needed his rest, so Richie ran his fingers through Mike’s hair one last time before going back up to the kitchen.

“He cleaned the basement,” Richie said.

“Looks like you got a housekeeper,” Bill answered.

“I have a housekeeper. She comes by on Thursdays and Sundays.”

“I don’t think you’ll need her.”

“He’s not going to be my housewife, Bill. He just...got bored or something.” Richie grabbed one of his beers before they could be placed in the fridge and cracked it open using the edge of the counter.

“I’ve been around kids. Audra’s sister has kids. They don’t clean when they’re bored.”

“He’s not a kid! He’s eighteen.”

“Eighteen’s still a kid. Did you ever volunteer to clean when you were eighteen?”

“Okay, okay. I asked him to clean up the kitchen so we could shoot a porno on the counter. Nothing to get all worked up about.”

“Beep-Beep, Richie,” Ben said, cringing at the thought.

“What? He’s gotta pay his dues somehow. Can’t stay here for free.”

“Beep-fucking-Beep, Richie,” Bill said, looking even more put out than Ben.

“Well, since he has the basement, what she would get up to? Movie night up here?” Beverly interjected, gesturing toward the living room. No one seemed enthusiastic, but they agreed. Whatever film they picked to put on, they talked over while Richie messed with the tablet Mike had left on the coffee table whenever he’d been upstairs.

He was still logged in to his Facebook account, messages popping up occasionally at the top of the screen that Richie was horribly tempted to click on, though he didn’t. Someone named Nancy kept sending messages to him saying that she was worried, really worried. Mom was worried, too (Nancy, Richie fathomed, must be his elusive older sister), and Dad—and Jonathan? A brother maybe?

Richie was snooping, he knew he was snooping and it was wrong, but three beers in and he was still telling himself it was harmless as he scrolled through all of Mike’s photos back to the very, very end of each gallery. There were a lot of photos that Richie hadn’t been able to see when he’d been logged in under his own account, even after Mike accepted his request. Photos of him as a kid, photos of him with friends.

His family, from the photographs and their own Facebook walls, seemed picture perfect. A mother, a father, a nice big house. An older sister who was engaged to a boy who had studied photography and journalism in the city. A younger sister who was definitely the apple of her father’s eye. They didn’t look abusive. They didn’t look like the type to terrorize their only son to the point he thought getting hit upside the head with a broomstick was normal.

Mike seemed so much like Richie himself had been when he was younger. He had a group of misfit friends, liked a lot of nerdy shit...

On the surface, it all looked fine—so how had he ended up laying on the floor taking a beating like it was second nature?

Were these people, this Ted and Karen Wheeler, like Beverly's Tom had been? Knowing where to hit and how hard so no one would see bruises and go asking questions?

Richie dug a little deeper and found only questions with no answers. He found the girl Mike was undoubtedly still in love with—some girl named Jane who had popped up once in the messages at the top of the screen. Up until his profile went dark the year he was with Jordan (who had not-so-mysteriously disappeared from Mike's profile in between the time Richie had added him as a friend and now), Mike was commenting on all of her photos and posts—even one of her and a different boy. "Wish you both the best!" Poor lovestruck idiot.

"Are you creeping?"

"Am I what?" Richie asked, only partially hearing Ben's voice in his ears.

"I said, 'are you creeping?' Are you logged into his account?"

"I'm not reading any of his messages, it's fine," Richie answered, suddenly realizing that everyone was staring at him. He half expected Mike to be standing in the doorway with a look of shock and horror, ready to call him all sorts of names for invading his privacy.

"Dude, you're creeping. Put it away."

"I'm just trying to figure it out," Richie said, keeping the tablet in his lap as he reached for his beer. He swallowed down what was left of it, but was hesitant to get up for more. He didn't want to carry the tablet with him and look like he was hiding something, but he also didn't want to leave it for his friends to steal from him and hide.

"Figure *what* out?" Bill asked. "Why someone his age would let a dirty old man like you touch him?"

"Yeah. Exactly," Richie hissed. He was really considering the option of telling them all to just go get hotels and have their little reunion

party without him—and to take him off the guest list indefinitely.

“Can I see?” Beverly asked, leaning over the back of the couch to get a look at the screen.

“You’re not getting caught up in this too, are you?” Bill asked.

“I just want to see,” Bev said, not needing to elaborate for Richie’s sake.

“Everyone he’s related to looks fine. They seem normal,” he said, showing her Mike’s parents and the family photos—the Christmas card from the year before that had Nancy’s fiancé in it but no Mike. So Jordan had kept him from going home for Christmas, even...

Or...

Or Mike’s family simply up and kicked him out for being gay. That could happen. That happened a lot when it came to affluent families with reputations to uphold. It was part of why Richie *still* hadn’t said anything to his parents—even though they probably suspected by this point and were really too old to care. Not like it would do them much good for him to marry and start churning out grandkids for them now.

“Those are his sisters?”

“And his sister’s fiancé in this one. They seem fine.”

“Yeah... I don’t know, Honey. Sometimes the families that look perfect have the darkest secrets.”

“I want to see these people,” Bill chimed in.

“You lost your spying privileges when you tried to break his arm,” Richie said, darkening the screen of the tablet as his friends all tried to rubberneck. Bev patted him on the shoulder as she moved away from the couch into the kitchen to get fresh drinks for her and Ben—and apparently Richie who was given a glass of water he didn’t think he needed.

“Are you ever going to let that go? I said I was sorry. I told *him* I was

sorry.”

“Guys, don’t start this again,” Ben said, sounding as exasperated at Richie felt.

“You put bruises on him. You saw how messed up he is, and you put even more *bruises* on him.”

“And I’m *sorry*. Did I do it again? No.”

“Guys...”

“What I don’t get is how you can criticize me like *I* did something wrong by bringing him here, when you’re the one who put hands on him,” Richie snapped, keeping his tone level even though he wanted to scream.

“If you two really need to have this discussion, I suggest you do it in private,” Mike Hanlon said, always the voice of reason. “Eventually he’s going to wake up. Eventually he’s going to overhear you fighting *again*. Mike doesn’t need that right now. It’s not helping anyone. And for what it’s worth, Bill,” Mike said, making the distinction very clear, like he was on Richie’s side in this whether he was explicitly saying it or not, “I don’t think there’s anything malicious going on with Mike. I’ve seen addicts and I’ve seen con artists—I’ve seen a lot of things, and I know you have too. He’s not like that. If he was, we would see it by now.”

“You really wouldn’t,” Bill said. “But whatever. It’s not my house. I refuse to spend the next five days fighting about it. Forget I said anything. Richie, I *am* sorry. I had too much to drink. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t want to see you get hurt.”

Richie took a drink of his water, realized water was the absolute last thing he wanted, and got up from his seat on the couch. He kept the tablet with him, grabbed another bottle of beer, and made his way down to the basement.

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Mike had nightmares about the Mind Flayer and El. It was more flashes of images and ripped apart sound effects than an actual

dream, but it left his chest tight—left his heart racing and his breaths coming in short gasps as his eyes shot open.

It took him several seconds to remember where he was and why *The Lord of the Rings* was playing. Waking up from a nightmare about monsters to face an Orc was not even close to comforting, but as soon as he found himself choking the smallest bit in fear and surprise, a warm hand was running and up and down his arm.

He realized then that his head was no longer laying on his bent arm, but rather on Richie's lap—and that the older man had an arm around him protectively.

"Bad dream?" Richie asked, not resisting as Mike sat up and pulled away from him, blanket pooling around his lap.

What time was it? How long had it been since Richie got home?

"Did I keep you up?" Mike asked, not fully awake—not completely recovered from the images flashing through his brain.

"I came downstairs to get away from the noise. You know, you could've watched it with sound on," Richie said, gesturing to the television.

"I... I didn't want to bother anyone." How could he explain that he hadn't wanted to be in the house by himself without being able to hear if someone came home? Especially since he ended up falling asleep anyway, effectively deafening him to any activity in the house all together.

"Right now, you're the least bothersome person in my condo. Bev's a close second." His tone sounded agitated and that only caused Mike to draw back further from him as Richie lifted and subsequently drained a bottle of beer. It was dark in the room except for the light from the television screen, making Richie's face blueish and pale, and hiding whatever gleam might be in his eyes.

"Did something happen?" He asked, knowing—or at least having a pretty good idea—that it was about his bruises again. All because he'd struggled. All because he hadn't just held still when Bill grabbed

him.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. I saw you did dishes. Thank you.”

“Sorry,” Mike said, looking down at the floor out of instinct. Richie was mad. He could tell by his voice, the way his hand flexed around the neck of his empty beer bottle. The violent flashes of his nightmare behind his eyes weren’t helping and Mike, for the first time in days, wished he’d woken up alone.

“Can I ask you something? Something personal?” Richie said, not looking at Mike. Instead, he was staring at the bottle in his hands and Mike was terrified it was about to get smashed over his head. He was going to ask something like ‘what were you and Beverly talking about last night’ or ‘which of your friends did you send messages to without my permission,’ and then he was going to say whatever Mike answered with was a lie and hit him.

“Okay,” Mike said, knowing Richie couldn’t possibly have missed the way his voice broke as he said it.

“Your parents...did they ever, you know.” He made a gesture toward Mike’s body, and then shrugged. “Just curious. I’m... I’m trying to piece it all together.”

“My parents?” Mike asked. He felt at a loss. Richie wasn’t becoming any more aggressive, and his eyes were on the television now with the glass bottle in front of him on the coffee table, away from his hands.

“Yeah. With Beverly, it was her dad first and then her husband. Makes sense how that can happen to someone as smart as her. She said you get used to things—patterns and things. But you...” Richie turned to look at him and Mike felt himself shrink back on the couch.

So it was this again. How could you let something like that happen to you? He’d been asked that question so many times and he didn’t have an answer—at least not one anybody could accept. Because he brought it on himself? Because it didn’t matter if Jordan hit him? Because it was no one’s problem but his own?

"I don't know how he got you to think that it was okay. You're smart. I know you are... That's why I thought maybe your parents or somebody—"

"They didn't hit me, if that's what you want to know," Mike said, looking at the TV instead of Richie.

"They just didn't want you in their house?"

"Dad's not exactly *okay* with me. We had a fight... I moved out and —"

"What about your mom?"

"Mom's... My mom, she... I don't know. She always says things like, 'you know you can always come to me,' 'you know you can tell me anything.' But it doesn't change anything. She was disappointed in me just like he was. Maybe even more, I don't know."

Richie nodded silently, watching the movie with some intensity—like the scene had captured his full attention for a moment.

Mike began having doubts that Richie had even been angry to begin with. In that moment, he just looked pensive and sad. Mike scooted a little closer on the couch, shame starting to gnaw at him as he realized he'd started treating Richie the way he did Jordan. He felt compelled to apologize, but bit it back in fear he'd just upset Richie even more.

"Did you guys do anything fun today?" He asked, hoping to break the tension.

"Huh? Oh—Yeah. Yeah, we went to one of Bev's stores. I got made fun of by the attendant... Apparently she didn't like my fashion sense. Uh... Went to a museum because Mike—other Mike—is a giant history nerd. And so's Ben. They got to geek out together. That's when you were playing Pac Man."

"Sorry," Mike said, catching himself a moment too late and grimacing.

Richie, for what it was worth, ignored the unnecessary apology. He

must've started getting used to them.

"Had dinner at some fancy place Bev picked out. Got us some groceries. Now they're upstairs watching movies or something. I don't know. Were you okay? Here by yourself?"

"It was... It was nice," Mike said, licking his lips anxiously and looking down at the coffee table where the tablet he'd been using earlier was laying. He could've sworn he'd left it upstairs before falling asleep. He'd wanted to go get it, but couldn't muster the energy.

"Beverly wanted to ask if you wanted to go to the store with her tomorrow. She said she'd get you some makeup. Cover your bruises and stuff. Probably get some false eyelashes and some eye shadow—make you look real purdy." At some point, his accent had gone the way of the West Virginia hills and Mike couldn't help but chuckle at him.

"I can't," he said.

"She said she can fix up your face," Richie insisted. "No one would have to know I pushed you in front of that police horse."

"I really can't," Mike insisted, still smiling because Richie was leaning over onto him—his lips dangerously close to the sensitive part of Mike's neck.

"But then you could go out with us," Richie said, wrapping his arms around Mike's shoulders and pulling him into a hug. For a brief moment, Mike scolded himself for ever imagining that Richie would try to hit him or smash a beer bottle over his head. Richie had never shown hostility toward him. He never raised a hand or a weapon except to protect him. How could he ever think of him as a threat?

"I-I really can't—I don't... I'd just be in the way and your friends—"

"Beverly's my friend. She's the one who asked," Richie pressed, clearly having no idea how much Mike wanted to say yes just to please him. It sounded so nice in theory, but Bill wouldn't want him tagging along on their adventures. He wasn't *their* friend. He was

Richie's...

Richie's what, exactly?

"You don't have to, but if you wanted... We could go buy you clothes. Get you a phone—"

"No! No—That's too much. You're... No. I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry, but no." Mike pulled away from him, already missing the warmth of his arms as he braced himself for Richie's sorrow or annoyance. Saying no was the best way to end up getting hurt.

But instead of anger or hate, Richie was smiling at him again and shaking his head.

"Alright, alright. You can stay in the house like a hermit. I can't say I blame you. I wouldn't want to be seen out in public with me either."

"No! It isn't like that."

"Oh. It's *Beverly*. You're too hot for her. I get it."

"No!"

"Okay, well, I'm sorry—but there's no way you're too hot for Ben. Have you seen that guy? Like a Greek sculpture. Probably hung a little better, though."

"Richie..."

"Too far?"

"Your friends are here to spend time with you. I'm not... I don't want to be in everyone's way. Half of them don't even like me—"

"Bill's the only one who doesn't like you, and I would rather he stay here by himself than you. Fuck Bill. He punched me in the face when we were kids, do you know that? Fuck Bill."

Mike, realizing this argument and probably any other argument he ever tried to have with Richie was getting him nowhere, leaned his head over onto the man's shoulder and let his eyes fall closed again.

He wasn't so much tired as just drained. The nightmare zapped whatever peace he'd had left, and he wondered if Richie would let him go to bed if he asked.

"Hey."

"s for horses," Mike mumbled, extracting a pleased little hum from Richie before the man pressed a kiss to the top of his head. Mike could feel himself melting into a pathetically easy to manipulate puddle of goo.

"Who would you be? In *Lord of the Rings*. I think I'm a lot like Legolas. What do you think?"

"I think you're full of it," Mike said, shaking his head as he buried himself fully into Richie's side. He smelled of expensive cologne and faintly of alcohol, and his body heat was so comforting that it bordered on intoxicating.

"You don't see it?" ♦

"You're like Pippin and Merry if they were one person. Or Bilbo if he were annoying," Mike tacked on.

"Ouch! Why not just cut to the chase and call me Gollum?" Richie asked, feigning hurt though Mike could tell he wanted to laugh. And then Richie was putting on a shockingly accurate impression of Gollum's voice. In a matter of seconds, Mike was on his back with Richie over him on the couch—"my precious"-ing him into a fit of laughter until he could barely breathe.

"You're such a dork! You're a dork! Stop!" Mike shouted, trying to push Richie's face away from that sensitive part of his neck he really hated that the other man had discovered.

"We stops when we get our precious!"

"Fine! You can be Legolas but leave me alone!" Mike said, his voice an embarrassing squeal by the time Richie's teeth found his throat. "You're ruining *The Lord of the Rings* **and** *The Hobbit* for me!"

Richie said something into Mike's throat that the boy completely

missed, his brain going blank from sparks of pleasure as Richie's lips moved against his neck and a meticulous hand slid over the waistband of his jeans. Mike wanted to ask for more, but didn't dare. Richie's friends were upstairs—anyone could come down and see them. Anyone could hear them!

But at some point, Richie's playful words and impersonations had bled into shameless kissing and Mike was getting caught up in it. His legs had wound around Richie's hips, his arms were crossed behind his shoulders. Richie's hand was cradling the back of his head—kind of hurting the bump there but Mike wasn't about to complain. He'd had worse and he wasn't about to ask for space. Though the front of his pants was starting to get tight and he knew that was just a recipe for disaster. They couldn't stay down here all night and he did *not* want to try sneaking upstairs like this.

"I missed you," Richie murmured, his lips grazing Mike's overly-sensitive throat.

"You were gone, like, ten hours," Mike said, his voice a pathetic sigh as Richie's hips pressed down against his own and gave the slightest of rolls.

"Too fucking long—just like my dick."

"I think I'll be the judge of that," Mike said, wondering if he'd crossed a line when Richie suddenly pulled back from him. He was startled a moment and blinked up at Richie's face, watching it twist with a playful smirk as his hips gave another tantalizing thrust against his own.

"Have I told you I fuckin' like you?" Richie asked, his hand coming around to stroke Mike's cheek—his thumb tracing Mike's lower lip. "Because I really fucking like you."

"Yeah?" Mike asked, rocking his hips up against Richie's

"Yeah," Richie breathed, kissing Mike's throat. His stubble was scraping at Mike's flesh, raising goosebumps all up and down his spine. "I want you so fuckin' bad."

"Please?" Mike whispered, rolling his hips again. They couldn't—he knew they couldn't. He really, really wanted it though. To be together, to have each other. He wanted it. He wanted to go back to that night in the hotel where nothing else mattered except each other. Why, why, why did Richie's friends have to be in the way?

"You have no idea how hard it is to say no to you right now," Richie said, his teeth grazing Mike's jawline.

"Harder than your dick?" Mike sighed, giggling at his own joke as Richie groaned into his neck.

"Fuck. Let's go get a hotel."

"Let's just go to the car," Mike said, letting his eyes fall closed as Richie nipped his throat again.

"Hell no. I have suede seats."

"Sounds like a you problem."

The sound Richie let out was a mix between a growl and a moan. He captured Mike's lips in another unfairly passionate kiss and then pulled away, retreating to his own little corner of couch where he adjusted his glasses and rubbed at his lips.

"Fuck, I've got it bad," Richie said, picking up his empty beer and then immediately setting it down once he realized there was none left to drink. He ran his hands through his hair, then got up and made himself a drink at the bar across the room. Mike watched to see if Richie would make him one and tried to hide his disappointment when he came back with just the one glass. "Bev reminded me I shouldn't let you drink when you're on pain meds," Richie said, leaning over to kiss Mike's cheek before taking a sip of his whiskey on the rocks.

"I haven't had any since this morning," Mike offered, moving to snuggle up at Richie's side, trying to get himself to calm back down—his abdomen subtly cramping as he rested against the man's shoulder.

"Better safe than sorry," Richie said, stroking Mike's hair and then kissing the top of his head.

On the television, the DVD menu was repeating itself over and over. Richie held him and Mike shifted to be more comfortable laying in his arms, watching Richie watch him while he sipped his drink. How long had it been since anyone had treated him the way Richie did? Jordan hadn't cuddle him without leading it into rough and unforgiving sex since the first weeks of their relationship. When it came to El, Mike spent most of his time holding her.

When was the last time someone actually held *him*?

"You know, if you take a picture, it'll last longer," Richie said, smiling down at him as Mike made himself comfortable with his head in Richie's lap.

"Yeah, but you'd break the camera," Mike teased, heart racing when all Richie did was laugh and kiss him. No anger, no hitting—no shame, no fear.

No one, Mike thought. No one had ever treated him the way Richie did—like he was precious, like he was worthy.

He reached up to stroke Richie's cheek, feeling the rough scrape of his stubble against his palm. Richie's hand came up to rest over top Mike's as he let out a gentle sigh. Mike hoped this wouldn't change. He hoped beyond belief that this wouldn't all change—that this soft caressing wouldn't turn to bruising grips and punches. If he was good, maybe.

If he was perfect, maybe it could stay like this—even if it was just a little while longer.

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

Some Bev/Mike bonding and some insight into the mind of Big Bill! Thank you all for reading! Sorry this chapter is so long with really no action >.< I'm a sucker for emotional digging.

“Mike. Mike, wake up. Honey, wake up.”

His eyes snapped open, focusing instantly on a woman's face way too close to his own. Beverly, he realized with a start. He jerked back from her, knocking against Richie who snored—loudly—and rolled over onto his side, nestling into his pillow still sound asleep.

“Shh,” Beverly said, bringing her finger to her red-tinted lips. “Come here.”

Mike looked from her back to Richie. He was still trying to blink awake, not really able to get his arms to move how he wanted them to as he propped himself up. Richie was still naked, thankfully covered up where it mattered by his gray, cotton sheets and black comforter. Mike had slipped back into the hooded sweater he was using as pajamas and his underwear before falling asleep, but he still felt completely exposed—completely caught.

“Here—here, get dressed. Come on,” Beverly whispered, calling Mike's attention away from his sleeping...lover? Could he, after what happened last night, call Richie that?

“What?” Mike asked, blinking at the little pile of clothes Beverly set before him on the bed. “No,” he murmured, realizing she wanted him to leave—leave the house.

“Shh! It's okay. Get dressed and come downstairs.”

“I can't,” he whispered, looking back over his shoulder at Richie who had pulled the blanket up closer to his face and was snuffling in his sleep, on the verge of waking up.

“It’s okay—Promise. Get dressed, okay, Honey?” She touched his cheek with her cold hand, and then she was gone, leaving Mike staring after her wondering what in the hell just happened.

He was tempted to roll over and go back to sleep, but found himself following her orders. He’d learned long ago that it was easier to obey than to argue. Beverly and Richie seemed to get along, so maybe it was possible if he did as she asked, Richie would be pleased with him as opposed to angry.

After last night, Mike was still desperate to please him.

Still, Mike pressed a kiss to Richie’s cheek, pausing a long moment to see if the man would wake up, and then climbed out of the bed when he didn’t. He dressed himself in the clothes he’d put away the day before that Beverly had dug out of Richie’s dresser drawers. It scared him a bit that she was able to get in the room and move around it without waking him. Living with Jordan had made him an exceptionally light sleeper—or at least he’d like to think so. Maybe it was the pain medication, he thought as he crept down the stairs and stepped into the kitchen. Or maybe he was just completely exhausted after having Richie’s undivided attention until nearly three o’clock in the morning after they snuck upstairs from the basement together.

It was early, no one else seeming to be awake except himself and Beverly who was sipping coffee by the kitchen sink, dressed in tight-fitting black slacks and a dark blue blazer that was embroidered on the chest with silver flowers. He wondered if it was something she’d designed herself, but was too nervous to ask—afraid he’d somehow make himself look stupid. He didn’t know anything about her clothes other than she had her own store in LA and possibly elsewhere too. For all he knew, maybe she only sold swimwear. He didn’t want to ask and have her kindness turn to annoyance.

“Did you need help with something?” Mike asked instead, looking around for signs that anyone else was going to pop out to confront him.

“Did Richie tell you I wanted to take you out today?” Beverly asked, her tone pleasant and friendly as she sipped her coffee.

“Um... Sort of,” Mike said, rubbing at his wrist anxiously, not looking at her. He couldn’t leave the house looking like this—not even for makeup to hide his bruises. Not for anything. Not unless Richie told him he had to, or that he wanted him to. “I-I... I don’t want to go.”

“I know it’s scary, but I promise you’ll feel better. I thought we could get breakfast. Talk for a while.”

“I could make us something,” Mike said, looking intently at the fridge. He wanted to go back up to bed and hide. What would Richie think if he woke up and found him gone? Especially after what they did together *last night*. What would Richie do to him if he found out he went on a breakfast date with Beverly? What would her *boyfriend* think? Did he know she was trying to spend time with Mike alone?

“Please, Mike? Just the drug store and breakfast, then right back home. I already texted Richie so he’ll see if he wakes up.” She flourished her cell phone and took a sip from her coffee mug, staining the white rim with red lipstick. “He won’t be angry with you. Richie’s not like that.”

“Okay,” Mike whispered, not because he wanted to but because it was easier than arguing. He would lose either way—either because he did go and it made Richie angry, or because he didn’t and Richie would think he’d been rude to Beverly. Jordan had put Mike in that same situation countless times, setting him up to fail just so he could watch Mike crumble and cry.

Seemingly unaware of Mike’s inner turmoil, Beverly just smiled at him and finished off her coffee before grabbing Richie’s car keys from the little bowl by the garage door. Mike followed after her anxiously, getting his shoes on and then picking at his sleeves, picking at the zipper of his hoodie, while he sat in the passenger seat of Richie’s nice car.

All he could think, besides the fact that he *shouldn’t be doing this*, was that Richie’s car did *not* have suede seats. He also couldn’t fathom how all of them had fit in his car the day before to go sight seeing without killing each other. The Mustang was anything but spacious and it was only a two door. He guessed it wouldn’t be so bad with the top down, but Beverly left it up with the air conditioning thrumming

as they started down the road, GPS navigator telling her where to turn.

“I don’t have any money—”

“We all know that, Honey,” Beverly said, flashing him a quick, cloying smile.

“I-I’m not with him for his money,” Mike said, looking away out the window and digging at his sleeve again.

“I didn’t say you were.”

“It’s what everybody thinks,” Mike mumbled.

“No one really thinks that,” she said, running her fingers through her short hair.

That wasn’t fucking true, but Mike kept it to himself.

It was maybe a ten minute drive to the pharmacy where Beverly spent a good twenty minutes finding three different kinds of concealer that matched Mike’s skin. He felt demeaned like this. He hated the looks they were getting, even as Beverly played the part of a mother upset at her son for getting into a fight with a classmate when customers started eavesdropping. He would rather just stay hidden in Richie’s condo until his face didn’t look like he’d gone one-on-one with a champion boxer.

His bruises were his shame. His scars were evidence of how much of a failure he was.

He didn’t want people seeing them. He didn’t want Richie seeing them, let alone Beverly and all these strangers.

Even so, he subjected himself to her attention willingly. He sat still in the passenger seat of the Mustang while Beverly turned him into an art project. She started with the wrist Mike had bruised trying to get away from Bill. The whole time she explained about layering and how the green liquid she bought contrasted the red of his bruises—and how all of it would tie together to cover up the marks with the help of the other liquids and powders she bought.

He couldn't deny that her touch was pleasant. Her fingers were so gentle as they massaged the makeup into his skin with little sponges, and her voice was a soothing tone which battled with his heightened nerves. He was scared of what Richie would think—he was nervous about what Bill would say if he found out. But he started liking being in her presence. He liked being with her, listening to her talk—even as she began talking about her ex-husband who had beaten her.

Mike was quiet and listened, letting her begin to work on his face and throat. The things she went through made Mike's stomach churn. From her father to her disgusting husband, she had it so much worse than him. Mike didn't understand how Richie could even consider their situations similar. Compared to her, Mike's experience was hardly even that bad. She'd suffered for years—he'd let himself get beaten down for less than one. He *let* himself. She'd been trapped...

"Honey, are these... Is this from a cigarette?" She was grazing his collarbone with the tip of her finger and Mike had to fight not to jerk away from her.

"Probably," he said, turning to look out the windshield at the other cars in the pharmacy parking lot. There were three scars on his collarbone from Jordan thinking a bruise he'd put on Mike himself was a hickey from someone else. So he'd burnt it off.

Mike let him. It was easier to lay there and take it than it was to fight. He was too pathetic to fight. Beverly had fought back and left... Richie had to save Mike because he couldn't save himself.

"How did you get mixed up with this guy?" She asked, dabbing makeup onto the scars.

"He wasn't always like this," Mike said.

"They never are... I won't tell Richie anything. You can talk to me."

"I'm not... I don't mean to keep secrets from him. It's not like that..."

"What's it like then?" Beverly pressed, working her way up his neck. She met his gaze and smirked at him as she covered up a very obviously fresh bruise chewed into his neck by Richie the night

before. He felt his cheeks flush and he looked away from her again. He couldn't even imagine what she must think of him...

They'd tried to be quiet—or at least Mike *tried* to keep Richie quiet—but Ben and Bev's room shared a wall with Richie's and he was now terrified that they'd overheard. Oh, God—what would Richie do if he found out they'd heard and it embarrassed him?

"Richie doesn't want to hear about my problems," Mike said, not meaning for it to sound as insensitive as it did. His mind was reeling with terror, caught between memories of ways Jordan had treated him after his Mike's "clinging" got Jordan made fun of at a party and various other beatings. A dark part of his mind started putting Richie's face to the images—twisted up unnaturally in wrath and hate.

"You really think he doesn't care what you went through?" Beverly asked, sounding miles away as her makeup sponge dabbed at Mike's throat, right in the sensitive place Richie had marked with his teeth.

"It's... You're not supposed to talk about your exes," Mike said, swallowing hard as Beverly continued adding another layer of makeup to the bruise. It was wrong, he knew it was wrong, but he liked when she touched him there. He was terrified that she would know—that she would tell Richie or Bill or her boyfriend. Oh, God. Her boyfriend would beat the shit out of him if he thought Mike was interested in her!

"You're not supposed to compare your partners to your exes. You're not supposed to tell your new partner how much better the old one was. No one says you're not supposed to talk about the bad experiences you've had with someone else. Especially if it's something like this." Finally, her attention had moved onto the bruise on his jawline—the one he'd had when he and Richie first met—and he was able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Mike sighed and watched a couple walk through the parking lot. The girl was clearly angry and the man was waving his hands irritably as well. A normal fight... The kind that would end as soon as someone said sorry—or as soon as someone set food down in front of the other.

"You don't have to talk to me about it if you don't want to, but I think it would help."

"About Jordan?" Mike asked, closing his eyes tightly. He hadn't told Richie much of anything. How was he expected to share more of his secrets with her?

"If you want to... Or we could just talk about you—your family. Favorite colors. Movies?"

Let me get you comfortable and then make you spill your guts. That was what she really meant to say. She wasn't dumb. She was kind and gentle, but she had tactics and Mike felt himself falling for them. He would have to say something eventually... He'd have to explain to someone sooner or later what he'd been through, what he'd done—what he'd let be done to him. Maybe he could work it out like a script. Maybe he could try rehearsing it to Beverly and see what things he said wrong that made her angry so if he got the chance to tell Richie, he wouldn't make the same mistakes.

"He worked on our house. My parents' house. Jordan. My boyf—my ex." It was not a strong start and Mike already regretted speaking that much. "That's how I met him," he tried again. "Jordan's company worked on our house when a tree came down on our porch. He was older, too. N-Not like... Not as... Sorry. I'm sorry," Mike stammered. He'd been hoping to reassure her that he was fine with Richie's age—that it didn't bother him in the slightest—but then realized how insulting it sounded. How gross it sounded, even to him.

"It's okay. You have a type," she said, flashing a genuine smile and a genuine laugh. "It's a good a thing. Good for Richie, anyway. So he was older?"

"Not a lot... H-He's thirty-three."

"Richie's forty-three," Beverly said, correcting him.

"I... I didn't know," Mike said, swallowing hard—feeling like he'd made yet another misstep. He paused for a moment to see if that mattered, if he cared—if it grossed him out somewhere deeper than his affections.

It didn't. Maybe he was sick or broken or desperate, but he didn't care. Richie was nice. He was cute and funny—his eyes were so playful and he didn't *act* like Mike's parents. They hardly even laughed. Mike didn't care that Richie was their age. He doubted he would've cared if Richie were sixty. He liked him.

"Why don't we get some breakfast? My treat."

Mike wanted to argue, say no thank you, say he wasn't hungry, but realized by taking one look at Beverly that it wasn't really a question. Besides, if she was hungry and wanted to get food, it would be rude of him to refuse—and awkward for him to just sit there and watch her eat.

After a moment of scrolling through her phone, she decided on a place and resumed driving while Mike looked over his improved reflection in the little sun-visor mirror. Aside from the cut on his cheek which Beverly had dutifully avoided dabbing with any makeup at all since the scab was so large, he looked...normal. He actually looked healthy instead of his usual sickly pale complexion. His freckles were completely gone, buried along with the bruises and dark circles under his eyes, and Mike couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. He felt like the shape of his face looked different this way—but that could also be from residual swelling. He wasn't too sure.

Mike could hardly remember the last time his face didn't have at least one mark on it.

They arrived at a small restaurant that was packed wall-to-wall with well-dressed couples and ladies out to brunch. Mike sunk in on himself, feeling out of place in Richie's over-sized hoodie and his own baggy jeans. He half expected Beverly to be granted permission to cut in line—she was a celebrity too, right?—but they patiently waited their turn to be seated. Beverly spent a lot of time looking at her phone, smiling sometimes and looking stern others.

"Richie's up. He sends you three heart emojis and a raindrop—whatever that means."

Mike found himself blushing as he shrugged. Well, if Richie was

sending hearts, that had to mean he wasn't angry at Mike for running off while he slept, right?

"You guys were good friends as kids?" Mike asked her, trying to make small talk to distract himself from the crowd.

"For the summer," Beverly said, setting her phone back into her white handbag. She told him a story about talking to Ben for the first time on the last day of school, and how he'd gotten beaten up by the town bullies to the point that it looked like somebody killed him. Mike listened and nodded along, trying to imagine what that had to have been like—trying to wrap his head around this cute little love story about a poem from Ben, chubby, new kid Ben, that Beverly had spent decades thinking was from Bill. Terrifying, intimidating Bill.

"Did Richie ever date anybody?" Mike asked, curious and feeling that she was in a good enough mood that she might indulge him.

"We were all just kids when I still lived there. Richie talked big, but I think he spent most of his time at the arcade. If he wasn't with one of us, that's where you'd find him that summer. Though..." She paused a moment, her eyes scanning the crowded dining room as the couple ahead of them in line was lead away by the hostess. "Well, who's to say. When he told us a couple of years ago...when he came out to us, he..." Her brow furrowed as she struggled to find the words, leaving Mike anxiously chewing his lip. He looked away from her and down at his shoes. Even his shoes looked too filthy to be in a place as nice as this—with someone as nice as her. "It was Eddie. He hasn't told any of us, but I'm almost positive that Richie was in love with Eddie."

"Eddie who died?" Mike asked, looking up at her again.

"Yes... I think after witnessing that, after going through that loss, he couldn't deny who he was anymore. I don't blame him for keeping it to himself. Derry was not the place to be out in the 80s. He probably wouldn't have made it to eighteen if he'd been out... Bowers would've killed him."

"Is Bowers the serial killer? The one you guys talked about?"

She cringed and shook her head. "No. That's... That's a whole 'nother

story, Honey.” She flashed him a smile that didn’t reach her eyes, and then turned her attention to the hostess who had returned.

“Marsh? Party of two?”

The subject was dropped as they were seated, changed to food preferences as they scoured the menu together. It gave Mike a little time to process what he’d heard—make sense of the things he’d seen. The way Richie’s face dropped any time Eddie came up, the way he looked so sad and avoided the subject when he could...it made sense. But, even so, Mike felt he was left with more questions than answers. Something had happened “that summer” that none of them wanted him to know about, something related to Eddie and their other friend’s deaths, maybe. A serial killer, Richie had said. “It,” Mr. Hanlon had called it. Now Beverly was mentioning someone named Bowers. There was so much he didn’t know.

But, then again, there was a lot about Mike that Richie and his so called Losers Club could never know about him. If he tried talking about El and the Demogorgon or the Upside Down, they were going to think he was insane.

“So... You mentioned Jordan was working on your parents’ house,” Beverly said once their food was before them and they’d taken several bites. Mike felt his stomach drop, but couldn’t say it was unexpected. That was why she brought him out, to fix his face and get his story.

Even so, it didn’t feel the best being scrutinized. He didn’t have much choice, either. She had been open with him, sharing details about Richie that Mike was certain he wouldn’t have gotten any other way. He owed her an explanation of how he’d ended up in her presence—how he let himself get beaten down so badly that her friend had to come and save him.

Jordan had paid very close attention to him, Mike told her. After getting dumped by El (who he didn’t dare elaborate on), any attention was flattering. Mike had been on track to graduate early and enroll in an early college program and, like Steve and Nancy back in the day, Jordan had spent a good amount of time helping Mike *study*.

Jordan was the first person who ever seemed to want to touch him—who seemed to like being touched by him. It was all so new and exciting and terrifyingly easy to get caught up in. Jordan bought him clothes and gifts and took him on expensive dates. They saw any movie Mike wanted; they'd do anything Mike asked for the low, low price of overwhelmingly great sex. (Or what Mike believed to be great sex. Jordan, even in those days when he tried, didn't compare to Richie. Or maybe he just couldn't remember what it was like before gentle touches had turned to punishing grips.)

And then they got caught. Jordan had gotten them caught and Mike was absolutely certain it was on purpose. Mike's father made threats, his mother cried... Nancy and Holly gave him sideways glances any chance they got—like there was something wrong with him, like he was some rotting, disgusting piece of trash at their family dinner table.

Mike graduated early, moved in with Jordan because his father gave the ultimatum of “straighten out or get out,” and then it all went to shit.

Jordan was jealous of his friends and Mike had reluctantly found himself getting pulled away from The Party more and more often. He missed birthday parties, he missed movie nights, he missed any plan ever that he was invited to for months. Their campaign was cut short, pissing off everyone, and Mike retreated into Jordan's arms out of shame—out of loneliness, hardly even realizing that Jordan was the reason he was losing his friends. Lucas told him off about a dozen times for choosing someone over them “again,” and formally banished him from The Party for good.

So there he was, no family and now no friends either.

The part time job Mike had gotten while in high school fired him after Jordan consistently shut off his alarm and made him oversleep. He had night terrors about El that he could never fully explain, and he would wake Jordan up in the middle of the night, every night almost, either screaming or shivering or crying in his sleep. Jordan, who typically stayed up ungodly late because his work didn't often start until after one o'clock, didn't like it. He never got any sleep, he said, and Mike's alarms in the morning disturbed him further. It was

like Mike *didn't want* him to get any rest—like Mike *didn't want* him to be able to pay the bills.

It led to an argument and that was the first time Jordan hit him—and he hit him *hard*. Mike had hit him back and ended up on the floor getting choked until he was in tears. He told Jordan he was going to leave—cried like a child that he was going to tell his parents what Jordan had done to him.

He never told them. When he came back to get more of this things, his mother followed him around asking questions and he'd told her to mind her own business. His friends saw the marks extending down his wrists and blossoming on his cheeks in photos Jordan shared on Facebook as the weeks ticked by. He never got to see any of them in person after being banished and never answered their questions when they messaged him.

Why should he? He was banished. They didn't apologize. They wanted him gone. They weren't his friends anymore... He had taken them for granted and didn't deserve their compassion. He'd taken so much for granted; the only thing he deserved was Jordan's endless wrath.

He never made it into the college program. He failed the test he'd needed to take because Jordan and the night terrors (which had gotten worse with the help of daily beatings) didn't let him sleep in three days. His father, who had received the notice in the mail at his house, demanded Mike repay him the cost of the enrollment and application fees. Jordan paid since Mike no longer had a job and that was when it got worse.

No friends, no family, no education, no money... And now he owed Jordan close to three-grand.

I always told you you were fucking stupid. Don't know why everyone acts like you're some kind of genius. How hard is it to pass a damned test for high schoolers?

Mike screamed at him then, hating how true the words felt, wishing that Jordan were wrong. He screamed, Jordan punched him, threw him on the bed and took him for the first time against his will. It had

happened so quickly. One minute he was yelling, then his face exploded in pain. He was crying, he was hurt, and then Jordan was ripping at his clothes and it just...it happened.

Mike couldn't remember if he'd fought back or not. For a moment, he'd thought it was their usual makeup session. It was never gentle, especially not when Jordan was mad, but he'd never been violated like that before. He'd said no. He'd said he was sorry. He'd said all kinds of things in hopes Jordan would lighten up. But he didn't remember fighting back.

He'd said he would tell his parents. He cried when it was over and he saw how much blood he'd lost from how forcefully he'd been taken. He was frightened and confused and just *hurting*. No apologies from Jordan this time. No, "I'm so sorry. Why did you make me do this?" this time. He said he'd tell his mother and Jordan punched him again.

Yeah, go cry to your mommy! Go tell her you got fucked in the ass. Your dad will love the details, too. Bet they'd think it finally taught you a lesson! You think they wanna hear you bitching?

And he was right... They *wouldn't* care. If anything, he'd get an "I told you so" in place of the sympathy he craved.

After all, it was his own fault. He put himself in that situation. He was the one who couldn't wake up on time and lost his job. He was the one who failed the test and wasted three thousand dollars for the college program. He was the one who stayed after Jordan hit him the first time. He was the one who let himself fall for the construction worker fixing their porch because the man gave him minuscule bits of attention.

He fell into a routine after that. His father quit paying for his cell phone and Jordan refused to let him get a new service plan. He lost all contact with his friends and was made to spend time exclusively with Jordan and his less-than-compassionate entourage. He cleaned the house, kept up with the yard work, made meals—made a perfect housewife for Jordan who still couldn't trust him no matter how hard he tried to prove his commitment.

So Mike found himself with no family and no friends, no way out. If he wanted love, it came from Jordan—and only if he behaved. If he was good, he'd get kisses. If he was perfect, he'd get treated like a human being in the bedroom and not just a punching bag. He learned the rules; he learned to submit.

"Didn't make it any easier," Mike said, hand shaking as he lifted his cup of water to his lips. He'd been quietly spilling his guts over their breakfast and his composure was quickly crumbling. "Sometimes he'd get so mad it would scare me. Like the other day—the day I met Richie. We were out getting clothes and he thought I was looking at some guy. He would get quiet... You knew you pissed him off if he got quiet. All the things he was going to buy me, he just put back. He didn't say anything. He just put it all down. I knew what he was going to do. I *knew* what would happen to me. He already thought I was cheating and he... I just ran. I ran. He chased me for a little bit, but I got away. I don't know how, but I did."

He ran and ran straight into Richie, straight into this new, strange and fast-paced life in the city.

"And that's when you found Richie?" Beverly asked, peering at him with the same compassionate, attentive look she'd had since the beginning of his story.

"Yeah. I hid in the comedy club. I-I have this fake ID. It's really not what you think—it's just... I didn't get it so I could drink. There was this convention thing happening in Indy. This author we all like and a few people from some movies were supposed to be there and they were doing a private panel later at this bar near the convention center. My friends and I wanted to go but we're all...you know. So Dustin found a guy who could get us fake IDs and our friend Steve took us. It was really cool." Mike had half a second to realize Beverly didn't care about his nerdy conventions any more than Jordan would have and felt his heart sink. "It was really cool..." He repeated, taking a bite of his cold food while his stomach churned.

"What do your friends think about you and Richie?" Beverly asked, her tone the same sort his mother would get when she was trying to make him confess to things he'd done wrong.

"I didn't tell them yet. Everyone would just be upset anyway."

"Because he's older?"

"Because I let it get this bad," Mike said, trying desperately not to cry and ruin the makeup Beverly had spent all that time putting on him.

"You didn't *let* any of this happen," Beverly said. He could feel her gaze on him but couldn't lift his eyes from his plate. He *did*. He *did* let it happen. Hadn't she listened? "Mike, listen to me. This wasn't your fault. He tricked you. That guy knew where you were hurting and he knew how to use it against you. That's what they do. That's what *monsters* like him do to people like us—people who are too forgiving, too hopeful."

Mike flinched when her cold hand caressed his cheek again, yanking him out of his downward spiraling thoughts.

"Have you told Richie any of this? About how you met Jordan or—"

"No," Mike said, pulling away from her touch. "I was going to, just... I couldn't when it happened and then...then we were on the train and —"

"It's hard to find time when you're never alone, huh?" She asked, surprising him constantly with how gentle she was in her gestures and her speech. She understood him in a way that he'd only ever dreamed someone would. She didn't lash out at him, even when he said stupid things that made him deserving of anger. She just listened and nodded and related her own experiences back to the pain he felt.

"I really do like him," Mike whispered, picking up his glass of water again. "I know it looks bad, but I told him not to bring me here. I asked him not to. I don't want his money or anything. I... I liked him, is all. He was nice to me. He *is* nice to me. I know it looks really bad and...and that's why Bill hates me and no one trusts me. I told him to leave me and he wouldn't. I *do* like him. I *do*..."

"Do you wish he had? Left you behind?"

"No! I don't know..." Mike looked up at her again. She was watching him closely, studying him, with a sad look in her eyes—a pitying

look. "It'd be better for him if I weren't—"

"Bill only acted that way because he's worried about Richie. We're all worried about him. This... This stems a long time before he met you—so please don't think it's your fault. We planned this trip, we planned to come out here to LA, so we could keep tabs on him. Make sure his place was clean, that he was actually eating. Study him in his own habitat, you know?"

Mike didn't, but he nodded anyway. She knew him better than Mike, and he wasn't about to question her assessment. Richie was sad, he was in pain, and Mike knew that from what he'd seen before. He didn't realize it had gotten quite so bad that his friends thought they needed to come to LA to stage an intervention, though.

"Now, I'm not going to say too much because it's not business to tell. Just like I'm not going to tell Richie anything you told me." Her tone stayed soft but had a seriousness too it that made Mike's hands start to shake. He felt as if he were about to be scolded—or informed that he had a terminal illness with two weeks left to live. Her time being compassionate for Mike was, at the moment, done. Now, she was all business and focusing on Richie—what Richie needed. What Mike had better provide for him if he didn't want Bill and Bev and the rest of Richie's friends to tear him apart. "I'm sure you've noticed he's not often seen without a drink in his hand. It's... It's getting to be a problem. He's not a violent drunk or an angry drunk... But he's sad. He drinks a lot and it gets the best of him and he sometimes says things to me or to Ben or Bill that...that really, he should not be saying."

She took a deep breath and shook her head, looking down at her coffee cup. Her face seemed the slightest bit paler and Mike had the fear that she was about to cry.

"Work keeps him busy but he doesn't have much else," she said, brushing quickly at her left eye without smudging her eyeliner or mascara.

"He has you guys," Mike offered, wondering if he should place his hand over hers on the table. He wanted to—he wanted to comfort her—but was conditioned against it. He put his hands in his lap to hide

his shaking and picked at his cast.

“I need you to know that I’m happy he found you. I really am,” Beverly said, her eyes locking with his as she flashed a brief, sad smile. “I think you two are good for each other—no matter what Bill says or what other people might think when they see you two together. Richie’s... Richie isn’t the most mature so maybe he’s better suited for someone a little younger.” She winked at him and it made Mike twitch as if she’d snapped at him, his face heating up with embarrassment. “Even if it’s just as friends—as roommates. Whatever the case may be.”

“I plan to pay him back,” Mike said, trying to understand what she was saying to him. That she was worried about Richie? That Richie was depressed? That Mike, with his mountains of baggage, was somehow supposed to help the situation?

“Do you like him—like that?” She asked, as if ignoring his comment all together. Perhaps it was her way of saying Richie didn’t need his money; he had enough of his own.

“I-I... Yeah,” Mike stammered, his blush extending down his neck. Maybe, he thought, the makeup she put on him would hide his blushing as well as his bruises.

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” he repeated, ducking his head as he dug his fingers into his cast. “I’m not like a groupie or something. I really never heard of him until the other night.”

“Really?” She said, sounding as shocked as Richie had when Mike told him the same thing.

“Yeah. I-I’m more into DnD and *Star Wars* and stuff. I didn’t really watch TV. I didn’t know he had a show or...or anything. I just ran to that club because it was crowded and I didn’t think Jordan would look for me there. I’d never heard of him.”

“You mean to tell me he won you over with all his lame jokes?” Beverly asked, practically beaming at him. Her eyes were glittering

and it made Mike blush that much harder.

“He was nice,” Mike said, looking back down at his plate, thinking back to the first time he saw Richie’s face on that huge flat screen in the bar...the way his blue eyes sparkled under the stage lights. Kind of like the way they shimmered outside in the streetlamps. “He’s really... I like his eyes a lot,” Mike said, swallowing hard. “He doesn’t ever look mean. And he’s really fun to hang out with. I mean, we didn’t hang out a lot, but... That night at the club, you know? He... I haven’t felt like that in a really long time.”

“Tell me, what’s he like when he tries to flirt?” Beverly asked, her tone trying to take on the same playfulness Richie’s did, but tinged with intrigue.

“Awful,” Mike said, offering a small laugh. “He’s not subtle at all. The bartender gave me her number—in case I needed to call and get away from him.”

That had Beverly laughing into her hand. “Poor Richie! I can see that happening. Poor thing,” she giggled.

“Richie thought it was funny. I thought he’d be mad, because he was, you know... He was asking me back to his hotel and here’s this lady giving me her number. But he thought it was funny. He thinks *everything’s* funny.” Eventually, Mike thought, that was probably going to morph into a problem. For now, though, he was happy to not be getting slapped.

“Back to his hotel, huh? That had to be exciting,” Beverly said, smiling into the rim of her coffee cup, draining the last of it as she stifled a laugh. Mike offered no further comment. Nothing that happened in that room needed shared with her or anyone. He’d probably die of embarrassment if he thought about it too much in public. “Was he at least a gentleman about it? Or as much of one as he can be?” She asked, still grinning to herself.

“He bought me breakfast in the morning,” Mike said, smiling a bit to himself as he shrugged.

“And then stole you away,” Beverly said, almost dreamily as he

rested her head in her hands. She was staring at him again, assessing him. “He must really, really like you. I haven’t heard him talk about anyone since we all got back together. Now he has you... And he can’t keep his hands off you for five minutes.”

Her words made Mike blush horribly, and he was damned certain she could see it through his makeup because she started to laugh.

“Ben and I had to sleep with pillows over our heads last night. We *could* hear you, you know.”

Mike felt like he could just about die.

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He shouldn’t have grabbed the kid. Bill knew that—he knew it and he knew it well. He had no right and the kid looked like he fell in front of charter bus already, but he’d lost his temper. For the moment, Bill was willing to admit that he’d lost his mind.

He’d spent that whole night in a state of agitation and fear and frustration. It got the best of him...

He *worried* about Richie. It had scared him to death when the man quit answering all of their texts and then didn’t answer his door when they’d arrived from airport. If it weren’t for Beverly getting somewhat consistent texts from him (if one every other day could be considered consistent), Bill would’ve let himself get caught up in his fear that Richie had died.

Either from drinking himself stupid and having some sort of accident, or by suicide.

He’d been in such a consistently downward and self-destructive spiral since they’d defeated It. Since Eddie had died... It effected all of them, but maybe Richie the most. His communications with all of them became less frequent after their first reunion, even when he was on break from his shows. Calls would go straight to voicemail moments after Richie had sent one of them a text, he’d agree to plans to meet with Bill when he was in town and then flake out. Richie, who liked attention more than anyone really should, spent a lot of his

time lately avoiding it.

Bill was worried about him. They all were.

There were times he seemed downright inconsolable, thinly veiled by his impenetrable cloak of humor. Sometimes, the only tell that he was even depressed was how dark his humor had become. One of the last text messages Bill had gotten before Richie quit responding to him had been a joke about taking a bath like Stan—or maybe it was with Stan. Bill couldn't remember because it pissed him off enough that he'd given Richie an earful and then tried his best to forget it. It wasn't the note he'd wanted their conversation left on, but Richie refused to say anything to him—not even to say how his show went or when his plane was supposed to land.

For all he and the rest of the Losers Club knew, Richie was supposed to have been home two days before they arrived for the reunion. There was no reason why he shouldn't have come to the door when they rang the bell. He'd never implied that he'd extended his stay in Indiana or missed his flight or changed his plans.

Bill had been able to see his Mustang parked in the garage from the thin, angled windows on the garage door. It looked a hell of a lot like he was home and not coming to the door.

Yes, there was a good amount of time Bill had stood outside of his friend's condo trying to convince himself that his friend's lifeless body wasn't laying inside.

And then he'd shown up with that boy and offered no explanation. Getting even the smallest detail out of him about Mike was like pulling teeth. He'd turned up at one of Richie's shows, caught his interest, and then...Richie just brought him halfway across the country to live with him? After what, one day of knowing him?

Bill was expected to treat that like it was *normal*?

Richie, who was in the closet to literally every human outside of the Losers Club, had brought a teenage boy home to live with him. A teenage boy who looked exactly like him, no less. When Bill first saw him, he'd thought for sure it was his kid. That he could have handled.

That was something he could almost come to expect from a reckless person like Richie Tozier. Hell, it would have been a *pleasant* surprise to find out one of the Losers had actually had a kid.

But nothing in their lives had ever been straightforward.

Richie had clearly gone out of his mind—too far gone in his never-ending bender to realize that he was on the fast track to ruining his career and his life.

As for the kid, it was just too obviously some kind of con. Some kind of set up. If they weren't related (Bill was still sorely convinced they were, which made matters even worse), then what the hell was an eighteen-year-old doing with someone Richie's age? Bill wasn't about to jump onto the "love at first sight" bandwagon that Beverly was on. He could believe it with Ben maybe—age had been kind to him. He could see a kid falling for Ben or Beverly. But why Richie?

Richie had nothing going for him besides his money and naivety. Bill was absolutely convinced that Mike had crawled out of the woodwork and into Richie's life with a purpose—to leech off of him until there was nothing left. Was it really so hard for the others to see it to?

His bruises were a sham. His sad, timid behavior was a ruse. He and this "abusive" partner probably put the whole thing together with one another, and Bill wasn't going to fall for it.

Richie, on the other hand, had fallen for it completely.

Four days in and Richie was completely dependent on that kid and it was going to end up killing him. Bill was certain of it.

"I—I get it. I mean, I understand the idea, but, shit! I was asleep! Couldn't she wait until I was at least awake?" Richie was making a mess of his kitchen while trying to make a pot of coffee, ranting to Ben about how insensitive it was of Bev to take Mike without waking him up first.

"Maybe she tried and you slept through it," Ben offered.

"I learned the other night, you are a heavy sleeper," Mike Hanlon

chimed in.

“Oh, shit. Did you screw me in my sleep, Mikey?” Richie asked as he spilled a filter-full of coffee grounds onto his kitchen floor. “Fuck!”

“Jesus, just let me do it, Rich,” Ben said, yanking the coffee tin out of Richie’s hand.

“All I’m saying is it would be nice to not wake up thinking he ran off.”

“Well, check your phone more often,” Ben said.

No, Bill could not stand how dependent Richie was becoming. It wasn’t that he didn’t want Richie to have someone else in his life. All of them had expressed their concerns to each other about Richie being alone all the time. He hadn’t even dated anyone since the Losers got back together. A lot of that probably had to do with the confession he’d made about six months after their defeat of It, but two years was a long time to be on his own—especially at their age. Especially when he’d mentioned, albeit playfully, that he was jealous of Ben and Bev’s storybook romance. There was a never ending slurry of self-deprecating jokes in his repertoire, and jokes about being lonely (usually tied in to Mrs. Kaspbrak leaving him behind). If he’d pulled out those lines around a con artist like Mike seemed to be, it was no wonder he’d gotten rolled. It was possible he was naive enough to let it happen without even realizing it.

And maybe it was also a possibility that Richie was all too aware that an eighteen-year-old would never have eyes for someone in his forties. Maybe Richie had just gotten...desperate.

Desperate enough to let himself get caught up in this daydream and get hooked like an addict.

Even now, trying to make a damn pot of coffee without the kid in his house, he was a wreck. He was trying to make jokes, but Bill could see he was visibly shaking. Maybe it was from lack of alcohol as well as nerves. It was becoming all too obvious that Richie had a problem—maybe more than one.

“Do you want me to just call her?” Bill finally asked, knowing he was the last person Richie wanted involved. He was truly surprised Richie hadn’t kicked him out to a hotel yet.

“Don’t call her! That’d be weird,” Richie said, not elaborating on why it would be weird.

“She wouldn’t answer anyway,” Ben said, looking at his phone. “They’re coming back soon. She just texted me back.”

“Is Mike okay?” Richie asked.

“I assume,” Ben said, even his tone starting to sound irritated. It wasn’t that they didn’t want Richie to have anyone else in his life, but this was a problem—this was about as bad as his dependency on booze. The kid was out with Beverly. What was the worst that could happen?

“Did we agree on where to go today?” Mike asked, successfully getting a filter with grounds in it into the coffee maker after Richie gave up in favor of staring at his cell phone with the coffee pot held clenched in his fist. It took Mike longer than it should have to get the pot away from him in order to fill it with water to start brewing the coffee.

“Uh... I think so,” Richie said, adjusting his glasses with his free hand, his phone still poised in the other. “Are you guys gonna be pissed at me if Mike comes?” He followed up the question with a vastly inappropriate pun none of them particularly cared for.

“Is he going to? Join us?” Ben asked, wording his questions carefully to avoid stepping into easy target territory.

“I don’t know. Beverly told me she wanted to get him stuff to fix his face. He doesn’t want to go out with his face messed up. Maybe he’ll change his mind.”

“His cheek’s still cut open,” Bill offered.

“Yeah, that’s true...” Richie’s eyes were still glued on his phone, scrolling and then typing.

"You know, he reminds me a little bit of Eddie like that," Mike said, looking at Bill. "Cut on the cheek, arm in a cast—"

"He's nothing like Eddie," Richie snapped, startling all of them a bit with the venom behind his words. He got that way sometimes when anyone spoke about him, but it was silently agreed upon that they wouldn't let Eddie's memory fade into the mist just because Richie didn't want to cope with his passing. "Eddie got stabbed in the face by a psycho and fell through the floor of a crack house. Mike just got beaten up by an asshole."

If Bill could get one positive out of the situation, at least he could say Richie's priorities were still somewhat in order.

"Who are you texting that has you so upset?" Ben asked.

"My manager," Richie mumbled, elaborating in fractured sentences that were missing too many words to decipher what he was actually trying to say. Something about a segment using writers he didn't like and a casting call he was being forced to attend by his network.

Bill left him to it after finally getting a cup of coffee. Ben and Mike had the same idea and left Richie behind in the kitchen while they took over the living area, putting on the news for a bit.

"Does he seem...different to you?" Ben mumbled.

"You mean besides the obvious?" Bill asked.

"He's just worried about Mike. You know, we've never seen him with a partner. Maybe this is normal for him," Mike Hanlon offered, cradling his coffee mug so the steam rose up around his face.

"Nothing about any of this is normal," Ben said, shaking his head. "He's trying to play it cool, but he's in a nasty mood today."

"He's like an addict when it comes to that kid," Bill said.

"He's worried about him," Mike said, rather sternly. "If you look past your conspiracy theories regarding Mike, the only other option is that he's telling the truth. That he is abused. That he had no other option but to go with Richie when it was offered. I can't even imagine how

scary of a situation that would be if I were Mike. He's had to put a lot of faith into Richie—and Richie knows that too. It's a rather delicate balance, so to speak."

"Can't help that we're all here either," Ben said, tapping his fingers on his coffee mug.

"Should we get a hotel or something?" Bill asked. For what it was worth, he tried imagining that his theories were wrong. It seemed unlikely, but stranger things had happened—he was sure. They'd fought It and won, an evil entity from another dimension had murdered his little brother and two of his friends—surely a scared kid from the middle of nowhere could have fallen in love with Richie Tozier because he just happened to be in the right place at the right time.

"I think it's best we wait and let Richie make that call. It might make Mike uncomfortable if he thought he inadvertently chased us off," Mike said.

"Bev's texting me. They're on their way back now," Ben said, eyes glued to his phone where he typed a reply. "They got Richie breakfast to go. I think that means we're supposed to see ourselves out to brunch when she gets back."

"You got all that from one text?" Bill asked. Ben looked up at him with an expression of annoyance, like he couldn't believe Bill didn't understand the depths of their love and how their deepest thoughts could be transmitted through the subtext of subtext.

"On way back. Got Richie some breakfast. They need to talk," Ben said, showing his screen to Bill as if he thought his friend doubted him.

"Sounds like she found something out," Bill said.

"That's why they went out together," Ben said, matter-of-factly. "Richie wanted her to get him to talk."

"What did I want to do?" Richie asked, choosing that moment to breeze into the living room with his own cup of coffee, his phone still

in his hand. He looked half-crazy, his hair sticking up in odd directions because he hadn't taken the chance to comb it, a coffee stain running down the left side of his shirt. He looked crazed and helpless, and his hand which held his phone was shaking.

He wasn't *okay*. How did he expect to take care of Mike when he could barely care for himself?

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry that your steamy scene is a flashback! There's a not flashback one coming (hahaha, get it) in chapter 12! And yes I've already written up to Chap. 12 because I have no life and think of nothing else besides these two dorks.

Proceed for some Hurt/Comfort, Fluff/Angst!

Thank you for reading and Happy Thanksgiving to my fellow American peeps! My body is dead from working a retail Black Friday but wanted you all to enjoy an update!

Richie realized two very important things as his friends watched the news and he drank his second cup of coffee. First, he was having an anxiety attack that he was desperate his friends didn't find out about, and second, he was starting to get a migraine. His vision kept getting interrupted with bright flashes around his peripherals and there was a ringing in his head that was becoming deafeningly loud. The fact that he could barely concentrate to keep his breaths even did not help—the fact that some hate crime was being broadcast on live television in front of him did not help.

Not knowing where Mike was did not help him.

The night before, they'd fooled around on the couch, cuddled for a few hours, then went upstairs after everyone went to sleep and...lost their self-control. Well, Richie had at any rate. Mike had started putting on the layers he wore as pajamas and Richie had reached over to touch him, caressing his arm—tracing his shoulder. It got Mike to look at him, all doe-eyed and hopeful. He'd paused pulling on his shirt and stared at Richie with so much *need*. How was he supposed to say no to *that*?

To even have someone look at him that way was a dream come true. Richie had seldom even seen looks like it from his most unstable

groupies—of which he'd shamefully slept with a few. None of his girlfriends had ever looked at him quite that way before. He'd had the puppy-love look, the lustful look, the desperate and desperately in need of a good fucking look—but not the one Mike gave him. It was so genuine and beautiful and just so fucking perfect...

It made Richie weak. He hadn't even been that drunk and his willpower was just non-existent.

He'd leaned in for a kiss, got one more taste of Mike's full, pink lips, and it was game over. Mike was holding him in place by the back of his neck, Richie had his hands squeezing at Mike's hips. If he so much as tried to pull away to breathe, Mike whimpered and kissed him harder before whispering out his desperate little, "More. Please, more. Please, please."

Richie couldn't very well leave him begging, now could he?

Mike was so quick to pull Richie over top of him, to wrap his legs around his hips and squeeze him—grind against him while letting out tiny moans against Richie's mouth. It was unnaturally quick how fast their clothes ended up at the foot of the bed. Richie had peeled off his shirt last, almost an afterthought, and in that time, Mike had gone from pressing sloppy, open-mouthed kisses to his face and neck to ducking his head and sucking Richie's dick into his mouth.

Mike had gagged almost instantly, taking more than he could handle but trying to power through regardless. Those soft, perfect lips wrapped around his cock were enough to make Richie's head spin, never mind the little tricks Mike tried to do with his tongue. Richie couldn't help but to reach out his hand and stroke the boy's hair, relishing how smooth it felt as the locks tangled around his fingers. He almost lost himself—Richie damn near lost himself in how good it felt to have his length enveloped in Mike's hot, sweet mouth.

And then reality crashed on him like a bucket of ice water. He'd had so many partners in the past few years—so many groupies and strangers and one night stands. Mike had been with two people all his life by the sound of it. Thrusting up into the boy's mouth was great and all, but not when he was suddenly afraid that he might have something—that he might've caught something out on the road and

was in the process of pumping it down the boy's throat. Hell of a way to start a relationship, giving his partner syphilis or, fuck, AIDS for all he knew. (Okay, that one was doubtful, but once the thought struck, it was hard to shake it from his head.)

He'd never forgive himself if he caught something and gave it to Mike all because he'd failed to get himself tested. So he'd had to make Mike stop, for his own peace of mind.

God, he'd never had someone on the giving end complain so much about their blowjob being cut short.

Richie had feared for a second that Mike would think he did something wrong, but he just whined and let Richie kiss him instead. Tasting himself on his partner's tongue had always been strange, but it was a tad different with the way Mike moaned into it. It seemed that no matter what they were doing together, it was working to get the boy off. Richie had the thought to one day see if he could get Mike to come just from kissing him.

As they kissed, Richie slid his hand between their bodies and wrapped his fingers around the younger man's erection, earning a loud gasp of pleasure from Mike. He sounded as if he were surprised Richie touched him, as if it were some kind of rare treat or a gift. As much as Richie wanted to believe it was just from how much the boy was enamored with him, he had a suspicion that it had way more to do with Jordan's abuse than anything else. He was so clearly not used to being taken care of in any way, let alone in the bedroom, that he seemed happy and shocked with whatever he got. And God, *God* did Richie want to give him everything.

If his face went slack with pleasure from something as simple as a handjob, how would he look when Richie fucked him? How would he look when it was more than just lotion-slick fingers fucking into him?

It took no time at all to get three fingers inside of him, and by that point Mike was practically incoherent. He would moan and gasp and try to form little sentences only to lose track of the word halfway through. He tried to ask if they were going to go all the way—sounding so eager and hungry for it that Richie almost blew his load right there—but Richie just kept kissing him and touching him in

ways he knew would keep the boy distracted.

Not yet—not this soon. Not until he was more healed, more *himself*.

Richie could only sparsely remember their first night together in the hotel—more details coming back as the sounds Mike made and his pleased expressions brought upon little snapshots from before—but he knew he hadn't been gentle. He never was. He was always impatient, hurried and desperate. Especially if he got his hooks into another man. It was so rare he allowed himself to enjoy it when he hooked up with a man—often either drunk out of his mind or so guilty and repulsed by himself that it was difficult to finish.

But with Mike, all Richie wanted was to please him—see him melt and come undone. He wasn't ashamed here in his own bed. He wasn't sickened by Mike whining his name and whimpering out his little pleads for more.

"You really want it that bad?" Richie had asked, smirking into Mike's neck. All he got in reply were needy little mewls and a vigorous nodding of the head while Richie continued thrusting his fingers in and out, curling them in just the right spot to get Mike's entire body to spasm. It was almost too easy. If not for the fact that he had Mike coming in less than three minutes, he'd have thought it was an act—that the kid had gotten good at imitating what he'd seen in porn.

How could anyone have wanted to hurt him when he looked so perfect when he was strung out on pleasure? Richie got him to orgasm and he became this helpless puddle of limbs beneath him, all happy and dazed and appreciative. Richie had kissed him again and set to work finishing himself off while Mike awkwardly hugged his shoulders and pressed their foreheads together. Mike was so *perfect*. He was clingy in all the best ways; needy in the ways Richie wanted.

When Mike realized that Richie had gotten off without his help (physically, at least, for the expressions and noises he made were enough fodder for Richie's spank bank to last four months on the road), he threw the smallest of tantrums. He whined and complained, saying that he *was going to do it* and wanting to know why Richie hadn't let him.

Richie had just smiled at him and kissed him until he shut up.

Honestly, Richie had to wonder what it would be like when he did—when he let Mike do what he pleased with him. It'd have to be later, much later, when his bruises were healed and Richie wasn't scared he'd hurt him—but it was an exciting venture he looked forward to.

Despite being unsatisfied with not being able to satisfy Richie himself, Mike seemed happy and content as they cuddled together afterwards. Richie was still over the moon at having someone who honestly wanted to touch him, hold him and be held by him, that the post-coital snuggling seemed better than the actual sex.

The bedside lamp was still on, illuminating all the scars and bruises Mike had—and all the age-spots and wrinkles Richie was ashamed he was getting. Sometimes, honestly, he looked at himself and wondered what the hell Mike saw in him—what anyone could see in him. He was getting old, his prime well and far in the past. He would only continue to look worse and worse while Mike's scars and marks would heal and he'd look better and better. The ones on his back that had been deep purple the night they'd met were now brown and yellow—fading away—while the scabs that had been at their center were long gone. It was Richie's goal that the only marks ever left on Mike's skin were ones of pleasure.

"You need to be more careful," Richie had said as Mike started falling asleep against his chest.

In response, he'd gotten a sleepy little hum and a kiss placed to the curve of his jaw.

"Burnt yourself with the hair curler again," Richie said, touching the reddened mark he'd sucked into the side of Mike's throat.

"You're annoying," Mike mumbled, smiling into Richie's neck before falling back into a silent cuddle.

Richie ought to feel guilty for doing it, for being so juvenile and selfish as to chew a bruise into his partner's neck, but instead he just felt proud—as if anyone who looked at Mike (despite the fact that the only people who would be close enough to look were Richie's

friends) would know he was claimed, that he was Richie's to protect, Richie's to please.

So when Richie went to sleep cuddling that warm—sadly re-dressed in pajamas—body and woke up to a cold bed all alone, Richie's heart went into overdrive. His chest hurt bad enough that he thought he might actually start to have a heart attack.

He'd woken up from a pleasant dream to a state of panic. His bed had been empty and Mike was just *gone*. His friends were all still asleep, but there was no Mike anywhere. His shoes were gone. Mike was gone.

Richie hadn't gotten wasted the night before and his memory wasn't any more hazy than usual. He didn't remember doing anything to scare Mike away from him, so why had he left? He didn't remember hurting him, not even on accident. He'd honestly been way more gentle than the night in the hotel, scared to death he was going to push on a bruise or a sore and hurt Mike in even the smallest of ways. He kept his dirty talk to a minimum in fear that Ben and Bev in the next room might overhear—that would be both hilarious and mortifying—so he didn't think he'd *said* anything wrong.

He had no answers. He had no ideas. Mike was gone, his chest hurt, he couldn't fucking *breathe*.

Was this how Eddie felt when he was having an asthma attack?

Richie felt damn near close to crying because he went to sleep cuddling his new favorite person and woke up entirely alone with no answers.

And then Ben woke up and asked him if he'd checked his phone that morning. No, he hadn't. Because his manager was trying to get him to come into the studio and he was avoiding it, and the only other person who would text him was his mother who only typed in all caps and that made him anxious half the time—so given the fact he already thought he was having a heart attack, that wasn't a good idea at the time.

Apparently, Beverly had managed to convince Mike to go out with

her to get makeup and breakfast. Apparently, if he weren't stupid and half-crazy and just checked his phone like a normal person, he wouldn't have been even half as stressed as he was. He probably would've just smiled and rolled over in bed.

But no, he was a fucking mess—so now he got to sit on his couch and wait for Mike to come home and hope that seeing him somehow made this anxiety attack fuck right off. Nothing could be done for the migraine though... It would either stay where it was or get worse. Maybe Beverly would be willing to drive for them on their outing today. Maybe the guys would just want to stay in and let him wear his prescription sunglasses inside without giving him too much shit.

"You okay, man? Your hands are shaking," Ben said, his hand on Richie's shoulder sending off shock waves of pain Richie had not been expecting and he flinched.

"Oh—yeah. Shit. I was remembering the last time I fucked your mother."

"She wrote me about that. Said you had a tiny dick," Ben snapped back.

"Nah, she just has a monster vag after giving birth to you. Didn't think I'd ever find my way back out."

"You guys are fucking gross," Bill said, grimacing as he took a sip of coffee.

He autopiloted through an odd back and forth where Bill tried to act like Richie's humor was new to him and Ben played along while Richie's head swam.

Where was Mike? Why was the news *so loud*? Would he look bad if he got up for more coffee just to have an excuse to leave the room?

Fuck it. He was going. He couldn't sit still right now which was bad because with his heart beating so hard, he probably needed to lay down.

Richie made his way into the kitchen, moving stiffly because he couldn't fucking see—hoping his friends thought it was old age.

Someone might've said something to him, but the ringing in his head was getting louder. After leaning onto the cold, stainless steel refrigerator for a moment, Richie was able to get enough of his nerve endings to listen and reach into the cabinet next to him for his bottle of Excedrin. He took two along with an ibuprofen and a Tylenol—just for good measure—and then swallowed them down with a mouthful of lukewarm coffee.

Mike was with Beverly, he reminded himself. Mike was fine—he was safe. He would come home and he'd be in a good mood, and Richie would make sure it stayed that way by looking happy to see him even though his head was splitting in two.

He just had to tough it out. It wasn't as bad as trying to perform a set when he was this sick—a feat he'd had to accomplish sadly more than once in his career. He was home, he was fine. He was home, Mike would be home, and it would all be fine. He would just white knuckle it until then.

Honestly, it was freaking miracle he hadn't fainted from how bad his chest and head were hurting by the time he heard the deafening sound of the garage door open and close, the clicking of Beverly's heels on the little steps up to the door. The sound of a paper bag rattling almost made him vomit his coffee and pills into the sink.

He heard Mike's voice as if muffled by water and forced himself to smile—grin and bear it, Trashmouth, we've got this—as the boy stepped in from the garage behind Beverly. The silver threads in her blazer were reflecting the sunlight from the window and felt like daggers in Richie's brain.

Mike said something to him that Richie could hardly interpret over the rustling of the awful paper bag that was now in his hands, deafening him completely as he let Mike hug him—trying not to cringe. His panic ebbed a bit just from being near him, just from seeing that Mike was home and no worse for wear, but not enough to make much of a difference.

“Is everything okay?” Mike asked, three times in a row. Richie could hear him, yet not hear him—not understanding that he'd been saying the same thing over and over again until the words finally registered

with him for the first time on the third try.

“Yeah—sorry. Sorry, you look perfect. She really fixed you up,” Richie offered, hoping his involuntary squinting against the bright lights didn’t look like he was scowling. He’d been told by an intern at the studio that he looked mean when he had migraines.

“Honey, you look sick,” Beverly said, her cold hand coming to touch his forehead. He barely had a chance to flinch away from her.

“Migraine. I took some pills. I’ll be fine in a minute. Just—Just a migraine.”

“Well, me and the boys were going to head out for a bit anyway. Maybe you should go lay down... Mike put that in the fridge for him for later, okay?”

“No—No, it’s fine. I’m really fine. I’m hungry now. I’ll eat now. Just—Please, please stop touching that bag. Thank you.” It was hard to miss the way Mike shied away from him after setting the bag on the counter. He’d have to make that up to him later, though he was sure it wouldn’t be difficult. It was hardly the first time Mike had been skittish around him.

Once the food was set down, and once the stampede that was his friends getting their shoes on departed, the garage door went up—car started—garage door went down. Silence.

The relief was nearly immediate. Someone had turned off the horrible news station, cutting the anchors’ chipper voices off, leaving the only sounds left cutting into his skull being the soft hum of the fridge and the AC unit clicking off.

He hadn’t realized his eyes were squeezed shut until he felt Mike’s hand on his own and they snapped back open.

“Sorry! Just... Are you okay? You look...” Something painful flashed through Mike’s eyes and he closed his mouth as if he’d been smacked. Richie was left blinking at him, his sluggish brain struggling to come up with words let alone answers.

“Is that coffee?” Richie asked, noting the paper cup beside the

piercingly bright paper bag that came from the restaurant.

“Uh—a latte. Beverly picked it. Is caramel okay?” Mike asked, practically whispering now.

“Sounds fucking perfect right about now,” Richie said, even though the last thing he needed was even more caffeine. His heart had stopped racing for the moment, but he was still jittery. Calories might help, though. He needed to eat, then he needed to lay down for a minute.

He grabbed for the cup and nearly knocked it over, thankful for Mike who helped catch it just in time. It was still hot and sickeningly sweet, but it sat well in his stomach as he leaned against the counter.

“I’m sorry I snuck out,” Mike whispered.

“No, I knew you were going,” Richie lied. “Was startled waking up alone, though. Thought you saw my dick for the first time sober and thought ‘fuck that nasty shit’ and hit the road.” Talking was making his head hurt worse, but it was worth it to see Mike glowing. The boy tried to bite back a smile as he looked away, definitely blushing under all that makeup. “What? Did it take breakfast with Beverly to convince you sausage gets better with age?”

“Stop! That’s nasty,” Mike said, his voice still gentle and quiet. “You’re gross.”

“Yeah, but you’re the one who came back for seconds. Must be an acquired taste.”

“Stop!” Mike laughed.

“Can you do me a favor?”

“Not if it has to do with old meat—no,” Mike said, not making eye contact and still trying not to smile.

“If I go, like...downstairs or somewhere...not here, can you open that bag for me. I know it sounds really stupid—it is really stupid. But it sounds like glass in my head and I can’t... My head really hurts,” he said after stumbling through an explanation.

“No, I get it! I do,” Mike said. “El, she... Sorry.” He looked horrified a moment, staring down at the floor like he expected Richie to slap him.

“El the ex? She got migraines too?” Richie asked, sipping his latte, trying to think of the best way to combat Mike’s anxieties. Jordan probably beat him if he mentioned his ex...insecure fucker. Now Mike was a wreck just trying to say he’d learned from someone else how to handle a migraine attack.

“Sorry,” Mike said, sinking in to himself a bit more.

“I had an ex who yelled at me until I puked once,” Richie said, wondering if mentioning an ex of his own might make things feel less awkward for Mike—show him that it wasn’t a taboo subject as far as he was concerned. “Back when I was in college. Didn’t know what a migraine was. Thought I was just hungover. I tried telling her, but she didn’t want to listen.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Mike said, clearly not comforted by Richie mentioning one of his exes. Reconditioning him would take a lot more effort than he could put forth at the moment.

“You’re used to handling them?” Richie asked, taking another drink of overly-sweet coffee. His trembling had subsided a bit more despite the added caffeine and his heart rate was back where it should be. His head felt the same as Pennywise’s must’ve after Beverly rammed a metal spike through it, but that wasn’t going to go away for a while.

“Kind of. It’s... She’d get, like, nosebleeds and stuff. She’d faint—her head hurts a lot, too. I know not to be too loud. B-But you wanted to eat! So go upstairs and I’ll get it ready and bring it to you?”

“Breakfast in bed? You spoil me,” Richie said, leaning down to claim those perfectly full lips with another kiss. Touch still hurt, but it was worth it to have Mike sigh against him as he pulled away. Kissing, at least, was the tried and true method for calming him down.

It took a while to make it upstairs to his bedroom, and once he did, Richie slowly changed into more comfortable clothes—back into

sweatpants that weren't as scratchy as denim jeans, back into a loose fitting t-shirt that didn't rub at his neck. He adjusted the temperature of the room and drew the curtains across the window to make it darker, leaving a crack of light so he wouldn't be trying to eat in the dark.

He was propped up against the pillows, under two of his blankets even though he wasn't that cold, and sipping the last bits of his latte when Mike appeared with water and a plate of food. Avocado toast with egg—not bad, and definitely not the worst thing to try to eat with a migraine. The egg-smell churned his stomach a bit, but once he got past that, he was sure he'd be fine.

He hoped he'd be fine and wouldn't end up puking his guts out on his bedroom floor.

"Well, this wasn't how I wanted our first stint of alone time to go, but thank you," Richie said, accepting the plate from Mike who seemed hesitant to sit on the bed beside him. "Beverly was nice? She offer to help you tunnel out of the country?"

"She's really nice," Mike said, not even smiling for the joke.

"She got *you* looking really nice," Richie said, forcing himself to take a bite of food—realizing as he started chewing that it was now a fifty-fifty chance that he was going to throw up whether he wanted to or not.

"Almost look normal," Mike mumbled, looking down at his feet, still fidgeting beside the bed.

"Lay down with me," Richie offered, rubbing the space beside him even though the feeling of his palm against the blankets made his head scream. Mike smiled at him then, looking less fearful, and curled up at his side—careful not to touch.

God had to be real, Richie thought, for him to finally find someone who actually just *got it* without him having to beg. How many times had he pleaded for his girlfriends not to touch him when he hurt like this? That their attempts at helping were hurting him worse? Or how many times had he been accused of faking it or being dramatic—

trying to get out of responsibility, trying to get out of trouble (okay, that one was his mother, but the sentiment remained the same). Mike wasn't here taking it personal that Richie could barely move and couldn't really touch him. He wasn't acting like Richie was trying to dump him or ignore him—at least not at the moment.

Richie ate what he could and gave up when his hunger faded out into nausea, then drank down his glass of water while Mike finished what was left of his meal happily. He felt a bit better with a full-ish stomach, but was still relieved when Mike got up to take the dishes away and refill his water.

“Do you want me to close this?” He asked, standing by the slightly-parted curtain.

Richie could've cried. Fuck, finally, after all these years, yes. Someone who understood him.

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After Richie fell asleep, Mike slipped out of the bedroom as silently as possible, leaving the door cracked the smallest bit just to avoid banging the wood against the frame. Beverly and the others had gone out to brunch, but he hoped she might keep them out a little longer so Richie could sleep without interruption.

He went downstairs to find the tablet he'd been using the day before. It was still in the basement with the battery so low the screen had gone dim. Finding a charger was easy work, but Mike was reluctant to wander too far away from Richie after the man had told him he worried when he woke up alone this morning. He didn't want to be the reason Richie's migraine got worse, but he also knew he couldn't trust himself to lay completely still as long as Richie might need him to in order to become well-rested.

There was an outlet plug in the hallway a few feet from Richie's bedroom door, though, so Mike plugged in there and sat as close as he could—listening for movement from Richie or anywhere else in the condo.

His Facebook showed many new messages and posts to his wall, but

also more friend requests. He chewed his lip as he clicked on the icon, wondering if it was someone Jordan knew, adding him back in hopes he'd be stupid enough to let them in. There were three fake accounts that he had no doubts were from Jordan and his goons, but there were also requests from Beverly and Mr. Hanlon. He quickly added them, then checked his messages to see one from Beverly right at the top of the list.

"Let me know when he's up and active. I'll keep the boys busy until then." She added a smiley face and two hearts, and Mike felt relief flood his chest. Richie could have as much time as he needed to recover from his migraine and Mike would have another afternoon practically to himself—no tiptoeing around Bill or Ben.

He replied to her immediately, thanking her, and then went back to glance at the messages from his friends.

El had messaged him again, the preview showing, "I'm getting worried. Please..."

Beneath her message, Lucas had sent an apology. "Sorry I said all that. We need..."

Dustin: "I bet it was the Commies!"

Will: "Where did you go??"

On and on, little fragments of one-sided conversations he was too afraid to add to. The worst was from Jonathan, right beneath Will. "Nancy is CRYING. Answer..."

His last message from Nancy was just a string of emojis.

Swallowing hard, Mike clicked on Jonathan's messages, reading back short sentences from months and months ago.

"Everyone's really worried. Please just talk to us. If you get this, talk to me PLEASE. We can HELP you. We want to HELP YOU. He says you're not at the house. I saw you in the window. Mike, what is happening? This isn't like you." Messages from birthdays he'd missed, holidays, milestones. Pictures of the ring he wanted to buy Nancy, the ring he actually ended up buying her... "Will says you talked to

him. Please answer your sister. She's been worried sick over you. She went to that guy's house yesterday morning. He said you died. He told her you DIED. Do you realize how scary this is for her? For ALL of us? Nancy is CRYING. Answer one of us. PLEASE!"

Mike took a shaking breath and started typing, shame eating at him as the words cut him deep beneath his skin. Jordan would say something like that. He would tell his family he died, just to see how much it hurt them. If he hadn't messaged Will, it was likely they might've even believed it. Or maybe they still did. Maybe they thought Jordan was using his account to mess with all of them.

"I'm sorry. A lot happened. It's hard to explain. Please don't be upset. I'll talk to Nancy. I'm OK. I'm not with Jordan anymore. Please don't let her go there again."

In a matter of seconds, his message had been read and Jonathan was typing.

"Thank GOD. Where are you? Can we talk?"

Mike stared at the message a long time, the screen turning black while he thought of an answer. If he told them he was in LA, they'd never believe him. If he said who he was with, it would look even worse. He didn't want to drag Richie into this, but he didn't want Nancy worrying about him when she should be worried about her wedding instead.

He lit the screen back up and typed a short answer, then backed out of the message to send one to Nancy directly instead. He ignored what she had been sending, hundreds and hundreds of unanswered questions extending back to the days when he'd still had a phone and was just too ashamed to talk to her.

"Hey! Congrats on the engagement! I'm happy for you and Jonathan. Sorry I haven't answered in a while. I haven't had access to a phone or anything. I'm OK now. Safe and away from Jordan. Sorry for everything. I'm sorry he said that shit to you. I promise I'm not dead." He sent the messages, then hesitated a moment, staring into the eye of the tablet's camera. With the makeup on, he looked more human than he probably did the last few times she saw him. If he

held his head right, he could hide the cut on his cheek from her too. It would at least put her at ease. She'd know he wasn't lying—she'd know the photo was recent.

It took far longer than it should have, especially since his dominant hand was broken and far from flexible, but he managed to get a somewhat decent photo—his scab hidden from view.

He didn't get a reply right away which was somehow comforting, and he was able to back out of her messages, ignore Jonathan's, and click on Dustin's.

He'd been sending jokes and memes and little short messages almost every day since Mike went underground. Mike read through a few of them, smiling more at the sentiment than the jokes themselves. It reminded him of when El had been missing and he'd called for her every single day. Dustin had done the same for him, but in his own way.

His latest running joke was that Mike had been kidnapped by the Russians for his involvement with El and he needed saved before the Commies sent him off into space to contact an alien race bent on war and destruction. Mike liked that theory a lot better than what had really happened to him—except, of course, for Richie.

Richie who was now snoring which seemed to be a good sign, as far as Mike was concerned.

“Back from space. Crash landed in Los Angeles. Not kidding.”

He got a meme and then “pics or it didn't happen” in reply.

Mike looked back at Richie's cracked bedroom door as if he was afraid of getting caught, then slowly stood up and unplugged the tablet just long enough to sneak into Ben and Beverly's guest room to take a photo of the palm trees outside. He had the brief thought that he shouldn't be doing this, but he was letting himself get caught up in having contact with someone else. It would be nice, wouldn't it, to just tell someone what happened?

Dustin, he realized, was probably not the person to tell.

“How the fuck did you get to LA?! Dude! And you didn’t tell me??? Not cool!”

A notification flashed across the top of his screen immediately. Lucas: LA!?!?!?!??

Yes, Dustin was not the person to tell.

Before he could even start typing to either of them, Will had messaged him as well.

“Um... How are you “safe” in LA?”

He shouldn’t have said anything... If Will knew, then Jonathan would know—then Nancy and his family would know and they’d have a fit.

Immediately, he clicked on Will’s message to beg him not to tell—feeling about as panicked and desperate as he had when he’d been a kid, trying to hide El from his mom and dad.

“Please don’t tell your brother or Nancy! Please! I’ll explain everything. I just need time. I promise I AM safe.”

“But how did you get to LA?”

“I took a train,” Mike answered, chewing his bottom lip until he tasted blood. This was bad. This was really bad. He had not thought it through when he chose to tell Dustin anything.

This was why he shouldn’t be allowed to have a phone. Richie gave him permission to use his tablet one time and now Mike had ruined everything...

“And instead of coming home you went to LA?”

“It’s complicated. I can’t go home. You know why I can’t go home.”

His father’s angry words echoed in the back of his brain—*straighten out or get out. I didn’t raise you to be soft. This is why you needed more discipline!*

On and on he would bellow and seethe and rage because his only son

had the audacity to like a person regardless of their sex. He loved El. He was in love with El. He'd always be in love with El. He just couldn't have her. No other girl could compare... Any girl he saw or tried talking to, he just compared to her. It wasn't fair to them and it wasn't something he could just stop doing. He was lucky, he thought, that other guys were an option so he wouldn't have to die alone. He'd always want El, but that wasn't good enough for Mike's father. Unless he settled for some other girl he couldn't love and didn't want in *that* way, his father would hate him.

He couldn't go home...

"But how'd you get to LA?" Will asked.

Slowly, Mike typed out, "I made a new friend."

"That's what happened the last time," Will said, adding two frowning emojis. "How am I going to see you if you're in LA from now on?"

"It's probably not forever. I'll still visit."

"Yeah. Like last time?"

Mike felt his stomach drop and he had to force himself to type an answer instead of closing the messages all together. "Please don't tell Jonathan and Nancy yet. I want to talk to her myself. I'm sorry for everything. Just forget I existed."

He probably shouldn't have added the last part, but what was he supposed to do? Any time he talked to Will, his friend just got angry with him. He was tired of people being mad at him for every move he made. The only person who *didn't* get pissed off was Richie. Mike could *never* go home.

"I don't want to." Another frowning emoji. "You keep disappearing. It really sucks. We want you to come home."

"I can't go home. You know why. I'm really OK here. I'm safe."

Will took a moment to respond, giving Mike the chance to back out his messages without accidentally leaving him on read. He clicked back into his conversation with Dustin, intending the smallest bit to

snap at him for broadcasting their conversation to everyone, only to be stopped by his friends' messages.

"Sorry dude. I had my chat up when I was screen sharing. LA??!?!? That's rad!"

"It's nice. Better than Hawkins all the way," Mike said, sighing as his head tipped back against the wall. In the bedroom, Richie was shuffling around in the blankets, but making sleepy noises that implied he hadn't quite woken up just yet. Still, Mike paused and listened, waiting until Richie started snoring again before looking back down at the tablet.

"Will said you made a new friend? That's cool."

"He is cool," Mike said, then added, "Still screen sharing?"

"No. Everybody wiggled out. Voice chat?"

"I can't right now. Later though. Promise! I'm actually allowed to here." He thought so anyway. It was strange, but Mike was getting used to how laid back Richie was about everything. If he didn't snap at Mike for being in his space when he had a really bad migraine, then Mike was confident he wouldn't get yelled at for making a small phone call once the migraine passed.

"Idk how you let that guy get away with all that shit. I'm glad you can talk now though. New phone?"

"Tablet. It's my friend's. He's letting me use it."

At the top of his screen, another message from Lucas flashed by. "Oh, so I'm the only..."

Only one you're not talking to, Mike bet the message said. He sighed and stared at his screen, really lacking the energy to hold three separate conversations at once.

"Group chat?"

"Only if you promise not to put your babysitter in it this time," Dustin answered.

Ah, yeah. That had been one of Jordan's rules when Mike had been living under his roof. If he talked to his friends, Jordan had to have the ability to see everything that was said—everything that was sent. How had he willingly given up so much of his privacy?

Even now, sitting in Richie's hallway all the way in LA, Mike pulled his sweater a little closer over his chest—feeling violated from here.

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Waking up felt a hell of a lot better this time than it had that morning, Richie thought. There was a note on the pillow next to him that he had to squint to read—forgetting he didn't have his glasses on. "In the Hall! Call if You Need Me!" Then a heart, then "Mike."

Richie felt stupid for how that simple little heart drawn on the page made his own flutter.

Sure enough, when Richie slid out of the bed, much steadier on his feet this time, Mike was sitting in the hallway, typing away on the tablet until he heard the door and looked up.

"You look better," he said, his voice still gentle and quiet.

"Much! I don't feel like my head's getting crushed between Mrs. K's thighs—you don't know who that is," Richie said, just as quickly as the thought passed through his brain and out his mouth.

He really did feel significantly better. His vision was shimmering a bit, but he wasn't sick to his stomach and the sound of the A/C running didn't make him want to vomit anymore.

"I... I don't. No," Mike said, smiling at his joke anyway.

"Eddie—my friend Eddie. His mom. Huge lady. It's an inside thing. Not like an old girlfriend or something." Why was he explaining this? His mind was like a river that had just broken through a dam. "Who ya talking to?"

"Oh... Just some friends." Mike looked almost frightened, his eyes going from Richie down to the tablet which he quickly unplugged and held out to Richie. His eyes were still cast down, meaning he

couldn't see the perturbed look Richie was giving him. "Did... You don't—Of course you don't," Mike said, finally looking up and taking the tablet back toward his chest. "Sorry."

"No, I was just curious," Richie said, putting his hands into the pocket of his sweatpants—not sure what else to do with them. He was oddly out of his element. Maybe it was the migraine wearing off or the extra sleep, but he felt weird with it just being the two of them. That was what he wanted, really, to just have time alone with Mike—but now that he had it, he didn't know what to do with it. The analogy of a dog chasing cars crossed his mind. "They're happy to hear from you? Your friends?"

"Kind of. Dustin is. Lucas and Will are kind of pissed."

"How come?" Richie asked, noting that Mike was still sitting on the floor and deciding that maybe he should, too. He sat down across from Mike who seemed to grow more anxious by Richie coming down to his level than comforted.

"So... So, Jordan told my sister and I guess she told some other people... He told her I died and everybody was really upset—"

"Yeah, I would think so, kid," Richie said, rolling his eyes. The audacity that creep had. He told Mike's family that he fucking *died*? "You straightened it out though? Told 'em you ran off with a sexy cougar and not to worry?"

Mike smirked the smallest bit but refused to laugh outright. Richie liked that about him—he liked a challenge a lot better than he liked the groupies who laughed at every word he said.

"No. I... I messaged Will, my friend—he's... Well, it's... Will's brother is my sister's fiancé, but Will and I have been friends forever. I talked to Will when you gave me your tablet—uh, when you let me use it. Borrow it. Sorry." He was stammering so much, pausing and getting frustrated with himself as he stumbled over his words. Richie was trying to pay attention to the story he was telling, how the people were connected, but he was focused more on the panic growing in Mike's eyes the longer he talked. It wasn't so much like he was explaining something, but trying to apologize without saying he was

sorry. Like he was trying not to get in trouble by talking himself out of it.

“You know that I *want* you to talk to your friends and stuff right?” Richie said, cutting in in the middle of Mike’s spliced together explanation of why Will was angry with him. (Richie, honestly, doubted the kid was mad at all. It was all in Mike’s head. At least, it had better fuckin’ be or Richie was going to borrow his own tablet back and give someone a piece of his mind.) “I don’t want you thinking that I’m going to flip out on you. Hell, you can tell them anything you want. Send ‘em my nudes if you really want to gross them out. Should be a few saved on there.”

“Ew! No!” Mike said, looking like he was about to fling the tablet away from himself. “Why would you save those!?”

“Makes it easier to flirt with chicks on the internet if I’ve got them geared up, ready to go.”

“No! That’s so gross—no one wants those. Don’t do that,” Mike said, shaking his head.

“Oh, I’m gross now? You weren’t complaining last night.”

“You’re not gross, but keeping pictures like that is gross.”

“So what you’re saying is *don’t* send you dick pics from the studio?”

“Please don’t!” Mike said. He’d be blushing horribly if not for the layers of makeup on his face and Richie counted that as a win.

“So why do you think your friends are all mad at you? Because you’re soaking up the sun in LA and they’re in the middle of nowhere?” Richie pressed. Mike seemed a little more willing to speak on it now that he’d been distracted from his own unfriendly thoughts.

“Because... Because Will went missing. When we were kids, he went missing and...and so when I moved in with Jordan and my dad quit paying for my phone, to everyone else, it was like *I* went missing. And then Jordan told people I died and...it’s a whole big mess.”

“Well, it’s not like you could’ve told them any sooner. He didn’t let

you have a phone. What were you supposed to do? Send a carrier pigeon?"

"I... I should've asked you to take me home. That's what they'll say. That's what they think... They're mad I came here instead of going back to Mom and Dad, but they don't *want* me. My friends don't get it. My parents...they're ashamed of me. My dad *literally* hates me. I'm his biggest disappointment and all that... I'd rather be dead than go home."

Richie's brain involuntarily pulled up images of Eddie, dead in the sewer, and nightmares about Stan bleeding out in the bathtub. Richie felt himself shiver. It was the same sentiment that had spurred him to ask Mike to come to LA. He didn't want to think about this boy, this sad, beautiful kid, killing himself or letting himself get beaten to death because he thought there weren't any better options.

"I don't think you're a disappointment," Richie offered, not sure how much his opinion on the subject mattered to Mike. "Listen, I don't know what you've been through or what happened back there in Indy, but you have a home here—as long as you want it. Forget about Bill, forget about the rest of my friends and your friends. Who cares what they think, alright? Who gives a shit? At the end of the day, we live for ourselves, right? It's not anybody but you who has to wake up in the morning and walk in your shoes. I wouldn't have been able to stop thinking about you, every second of every day, if I left you in that place. I wouldn't—I just fucking wouldn't. I would think about you all the time—"

"You'd eventually forget," Mike said, not looking at him.

"No. That's not how my brain works—I wouldn't. I really wouldn't. I never forget the bad shit... Not anymore, anyway. Not even if I want to. I would think about you and your bruised up little face every fucking day until it fucking killed me. And trust me, it would've fucking killed me." He didn't want to talk about Eddie. He didn't want to admit that Mike was getting sorted into the same category—bordering on bad memory meets nightmare. Just imagining Mike at that creep's mercy made his stomach twist. He *couldn't* have left him there. Leaving him there was the same as leaving Eddie down in the sewers to get buried by rubble—his body pulverized and crushed

surrounded by filth which Eddie would've *hated*.

It should've been him. It should've been Richie. He was the one who had nothing to lose, not Eddie. He was married—he had a boring job that people needed him to do and a wife who was probably as hopelessly obsessed with him as his mother had always been. Richie had an empty condo and a job a performing monkey. It would've been poetic for the Trashmouth to get buried in trash... Not Eddie.

At least with Mike around, he had a purpose. With Mike around, he didn't feel like Eddie died in vain. Richie felt like he was at least good for *something*. He wasn't lonely; he wasn't empty.

He'd didn't want Mike to die.

Fuck, maybe that was why someone so young was appealing. Richie wouldn't have to worry about outliving his partner as well as his friends. If things went as they were supposed to, he'd die long before Mike even got old.

"Richie?"

He had half a second to realize Mike's hand was on his own—and that his face was wet. Oh, shit. He'd started crying. Fucking migraines, really. That was the *only* explanation.

Richie wiped at his face quickly, pushing his fingers up under his glasses and scrubbing at his eyes until he was positive they weren't going to start leaking again.

"Sorry—shit. It's the—the thought of...not getting to tap that ass... Gets me choked up."

"You lied to me, by the way," Mike snapped, surprisingly more forceful than Richie expected, just as shockingly out of left field.

"What? How?—When?" Richie asked, straightening his glasses with one hand while digging at the hem of his t-shirt with the other. He lied? That odd grip of panic started to make a comeback in his chest.

"Last night. You said you had suede seats in the car. That we couldn't go there to be alone."

It was embarrassing how relieved he was for it to be a joke. He practically felt his body go limp as he let out a sigh.

“Oh—yeah. I actually just don’t screw in the car. It’s sacred.”

“Yeah, but it’s *private*. Beverly *heard* us last night,” Mike said, no humor in his face at all—which made it all the more comical for Richie who preferred this conversation over the one they’d just been having.

“I’ll have to tell her ‘you’re welcome’ later.”

“She’ll probably hit you,” Mike said, shifting around to cross his legs in front of him, the tablet resting in his lap.

“Probably. She’s got good aim. Learned that when she took out three punks in a rock fight. Well, I helped.”

“Of course,” Mike said, offering a small, unbelieving grin.

“She also stabbed a clown in the head so it wouldn’t kill us,” Richie said, somewhat without thinking. When he glanced up, Mike was still giving him that little smile. “It’s true! You can ask her.”

“Ask her about the clown she killed?”

“Okay, we all killed it. It was a group effort.”

“Like the rock fight?”

“Exactly like the rock fight—” *Except one of us died.*

Mike must’ve seen the humor drop from his face because the boy was scooting closer to him, the tablet cast aside again.

“Can I ask...about this clown? You guys keep bringing it up and then you get all quiet and everybody looks at me. I know it’s probably some secret, but I won’t tell anyone. If you guys, like, hid a body or something...I wouldn’t tell.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Richie said, trying to force on a weak smile as he stood up stiffly from the floor. “I think I need

more coffee.” He didn’t want to talk about this and he didn’t know how else to deflect it. With his friends, they could usually tell when his humor dropped that he wanted the subject to as well. With them, he could get agitated. With them, he was safe to get angry because they’d just roll their eyes and brush it off. Mike wasn’t like that, though. Mike would be terrified—and Richie didn’t want to scare him, but he *really didn’t want to talk about this*.

“Do you want me to text Beverly and let her know you’re awake?” Mike asked, scrambling to his feet behind Richie. “She added me on Facebook after they left. She said to message her when you were up so she’d know to bring everyone back.”

“Ugh, hold off on that,” Richie said, partially down the stairs by the time Mike reached his side—trailing behind him only a step or two. “I’m not ready for that much noise again.”

Richie tried to keep his mind in check as he emptied the coffee filter and rinsed out the coffee pot from his disastrous attempt to prepare a pot this morning. He kept seeing Eddie getting stabbed in the chest, kept seeing the Deadlights which didn’t help with the shimmers already left over in his vision from the migraine. And there was Mike, hugging him around the middle while he scooped more coffee grounds into an unbleached coffee filter.

“I could tell you a story that you wouldn’t believe. Then you could tell me yours,” Mike mumbled, his mouth buried in Richie’s shoulder.

“Yeah? What’s yours about?”

“People going missing and a monster from another dimension trying to kill us.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the Cliffhanger!! Stay Tuned!

11. Chapter 11

Notes for the Chapter:

Hi, guys! Thank you all again for your continued support! This chapter is a little rocky, but I'm going to hide it behind Mike being under a lot, lot, lot of stress! Also, I know story time and communication is important, but I really didn't want to summarize the plots of two movies and 3 seasons of a show when (almost) everyone knows what happened. I'd rather show the post-discussion moments. Hopefully no one feels cheated! Also still working out the kinks (haha) in chapter 12, but it should be up soon! And 13 is well underway! Let me know what you think and thanks again for reading!

The coffee mug Richie had been taking out of the cabinet fell onto the counter and smashed.

At first, he just felt his chest seize up, and then he felt a strong spark of anger that he had just enough self-control to stop from slipping out. Mike had jumped back from him the instant the ceramic mug shattered across the counter top, and was—at that moment—knelt at Richie's feet picking up the shards with his hands.

"Sorry! I'm sorry," Mike was saying, over and over again, as if he'd been the one to drop the cup.

"Did Beverly put you up to this?" Richie asked, cringing at the anger which came out in his voice regardless of his efforts. Mike looked up at him, big eyes seeming frantic and close to tears, then looked back down at the shards on the floor.

"No—No, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

"Did Mike put you up to this?" Richie asked, a little less assertive as Mike started trembling.

He didn't want to be mad at him, but this had to be a joke. Someone

had told him—either Beverly or Mike or Bill. Someone told him for some fucking reason and Mike was going to try using it to get him to talk about it. And he didn't *want* to talk about it! Why did all his friends think he needed to talk about it!?

He was in the Deadlights. He saw awful shit. He woke up to see Eddie get stabbed through the fucking chest, blood all over his mouth—blood all over Richie's face—then waved around in the air like a toy fucking airplane. Then he fucking *died* and they left him in the sewer. He didn't fucking *need* to talk to anyone about that!

"I'm sorry—I'm really so, so sorry," Mike was stammering, dropping more pieces of ceramic than he was picking up.

"Who put you up to this?" Richie asked, his tone as neutral as he could make it while his emotions got the best of him—while the tinkling of glass on the tile floor wreaked havoc on his eardrums.

"No one! I'm sorry!" Mike's entire body flinched, the pile of ceramic shards in his palm shaking down onto the floor again. Another head-splitting crash.

"Someone told you something—just tell me. I'm not mad at you. Just tell me."

"No one—really, really! Please! I'm sorry!" It was the same terrified tone of voice he'd had when Jordan had attacked him and Richie felt sick for having caused it. The feeling, however, was one of far too many for him to process—all happening at the same moment.

"Then what are you talking about?" He pressed, more urgently. It was a simple question. Why couldn't he just answer? What was he hiding that he didn't want to admit?

"I'm sorry," Mike answered, voice cracking. Why wouldn't he just say it!?

"What monster are you talking about!?" He asked, raising his voice more than he should have.

"T-The Demogorgan," Mike cried, a sharp hiss escaping his lips as he picked up and subsequently dropped one of the many splinters back

onto the floor.

“Just leave it! You’re going to cut yourself,” Richie warned, leaning down to grab Mike’s wrists and put an end to his constant picking up and dropping of all the broken pieces that seemed to be getting smaller and louder each time Mike touched them. Mike pulled back from him, still trying to pick up more pieces as a bead of red blood swelled in his palm. Richie’s rage turning quick into panic. He didn’t want Mike *hurt*. He didn’t want to be the reason he was *hurt*. “Stop!”

Mike flinched, and in an instant he’d dropped all the pieces he’d picked up and was shielding his face with his hands—trembling as a trail of crimson slid down his left palm.

The blood running from his hand dripped down onto the tile floor. Richie felt as if he’d just noticed it for the first time, his wave of anger and frustration receding for the moment as he grappled for a paper towel.

“You cut your—Babe, you cut your hand,” Richie said, repeating it with a little more urgency when Mike flinched away from him. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I yelled. Let me help. Sorry, Babe. Sorry.” It took more effort than it should have to get Mike on his feet so Richie could wash out the cut and see how bad it was. Really, it was just a small nick near the crease of his palm, not the horrific gash Richie was seeing in his mind’s eye, but it was bad—it shouldn’t have been there in the first place. Richie couldn’t shake the fact that it was his fault, entirely his fault.

Mike was choking back tears as Richie treated his hand and covered it with a bandage from the old box beside his over the counter meds in the cabinet beside the fridge. Once Mike was bandaged up, Richie cleaned up the broken cup, got himself and Mike each a different mug, and poured the coffee.

“I got cream at the grocery store last night. If you want it,” Richie said, not sure if it was better or worse to act like nothing had happened. The condo was quiet again, aside from Mike’s sniffing, making the tension between them close to deafening. “Do you want coffee?”

“Yes,” Mike said, his voice the smallest Richie felt it had ever been any time they’d spoken.

“Cream?” All he got in response was a tiny nod.

He put an arm around Mike once he’d handed off the coffee mug and guided him into the living room. The sun, he realized, was close to setting—meaning he’d spent the entire day passed out in a bed. Mike had spent the entire day sitting in that hallway doting on him only for Richie to wake up and yell at him... Great. Off to a good start their first day alone together.

“Sorry I yelled,” Richie said again, once they were both seated and Mike seemed to have gotten somewhat comfortable with his legs folded underneath him.

“Sorry,” Mike repeated, flinching so hard Richie feared he’d spill his coffee on himself.

“I... I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions,” he said, feeling the slightest bit of resentment come out in his tone. It was obvious to him that one of his friends put Mike up to this; that was why they were all out today—not just because of his migraine, but because they wanted Mike to get him to talk.

“It really did happen,” Mike whimpered, the tears finally falling. “It took my friend and it took El and—and it was horrible. I’m not crazy. I’m *not* crazy.” Something about the way his voice shook made Richie pause. Mike had never been good at hiding anything. If he lied, he didn’t make eye contact. If he were lying, why hadn’t he given up by now? “It was real—all of it. It killed Nancy’s friend. It killed *my* friends. I *saw* it.”

“It?” Richie asked. No way, he thought. No fucking way.

“The Demogorgon—the Mind Flayer. All the monsters from that evil place. They’re real and I have—I have *nightmares* about it. I have nightmares *all the time!* I wouldn’t lie. I’m not a liar. I’m not! I’m not *crazy!*” Mike had started sobbing somewhere in the middle of his proclamations and Richie was left staring at him—his mind grinding to a halt.

"I don't... I don't think you're crazy," Richie said, blinking against the bright lights flashing in his vision again. Beside him, Mike started sobbing harder, pausing to choke or try to take a sip of coffee in hopes of calming himself down—all in vain. He was practically in hysterics, rubbing at his face while he cried. There was no way he was faking this... Whatever he saw or thought he saw, he believed it. It was real to him. "Mike, I don't think you're crazy. I don't. I really, really don't. Just—Just tell me... Promise—Fuck, just promise you're not lying to me right now."

"I wouldn't lie to you! You're all I *have*!" The coffee in Mike's hands spilled partially onto his lap and partially on the couch from the tremors in his hands. Richie grabbed the mug and pulled it away from him, setting it on the coffee table to be joined by his own cup. "I'm sorry! Richie, I'm—I'm sorry," Mike cried, trying to get up from the couch—probably wanting to get paper towels.

Richie snagged his arm in a gentle grasp, pulling him back down and keeping him still.

"Hush—stop. It's fine," Richie said, touching Mike's cheek with the hand not clutching his arm, smoothing his hand over it to brush away the tears. The makeup made his skin tacky where it mixed with the tears, staining Richie's fingers a pale beige. "Tell me what you're talking about. What monsters—what evil place? Tell me."

"You won't believe me," Mike said, his cut hand resting over top Richie's on his cheek, warm and trembling. His eyes held nothing but pain and fright. So big... So sad. He'd never wanted Mike to look that way because of him.

Richie leaned in and pressed a small kiss to the corner of Mike's mouth, trying not to be disheartened when the boy flinched. Richie deserved it for how he'd been carrying on in the kitchen. He shouldn't have let his anger get the best of him, migraine or no. Whether Mike was lying or not—crazy or sane—he didn't deserve to get screamed at after all he'd been through.

"You don't believe me," Mike repeated, one of his tears running down over Richie's fingers where they still rested on his cheek.

“Try me,” Richie said, kissing Mike one last time before pulling back, holding both of Mike’s hands and caressing them with his thumbs as gently as he could. “Try me.”

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Mike felt exhausted. Drained. Raw.

He was caged in Richie’s arms, laying against his chest being squeezed so tight he could do little more than take the shallowest of breaths. He’d told his story—start to finish, even the things about El he was sure would never be believed—knowing by the time he finished that Richie was going to throw him out to the streets.

And then Richie had told *his* story—start to finish, crying as he admitted how Eddie had actually died. How Stanley had died... Or why he did what he did. He’d been infected by “It” the way Will and El had been infected by the Mind Flayer in the Upside Down, and he’d killed himself—it had made him kill himself—so he wouldn’t have to go back to face it again.

“I never thought there’d be more than one,” Richie had whispered what felt like hours ago, his face buried in Mike’s neck while Mike held him—comforted *him*. “Makes sense there was more than one.” A little while after that, he’d tacked on, “Man... My migraines would be worth it if they gave me telekinesis.”

He was trying to joke again and that was a good sign, but he’d been silent since that remark. Even after they’d switched roles and Richie went back to clutching onto Mike, he wouldn’t loosen his grip on Mike’s body for anything. That was fine. With how exposed and ravished Mike was feeling, Richie holding him so securely made him feel kind of safe. He’d thought, in the beginning, as a sort of best case scenario, he’d tell Richie his story and the man would crack a joke or two—maybe tell him he should write comic books or something—and then admit that maybe he and his friends killed a serial killer and no one knew about it. He didn’t expect this man he’d met less than a week ago would have shared in the same awful nightmare Mike had.

That his friends had all seen the same things...

Bill, almost, made more sense now. He'd lost his brother to that monster—that thing. Then he lost two of his best friends. Of course he was protective now. Of course he was defensive to a fault. Just hearing the story made Mike wish he was stronger and bigger so that he could shield Richie, too. He must've been so scared... He had to feel so guilty, fearing he was the reason Eddie died.

Mike had felt a lot of awful things toward himself for what happened to Will and with El and Hopper and everyone... He was the one who led his friends out to try finding Will, he was the one who found El and forced his friends to keep her a secret. He had fights with them to protect her—and then lost her, and lost her again, and again... But she didn't die. Mike would've been ripped to pieces if she died because of him.

So, he stayed still and let Richie hug him long past the time it started to hurt.

"If you... If you stood up to a literal monster...and the government...and a million fucking other people, how in the hell did you let that creep do this to you?" Richie asked, his voice rough as he ran his finger over Mike's cast.

He was exhausted and raw. Mike didn't know how much more he could give.

"El didn't want me anymore," Mike whispered, closing his eyes as Richie ran his palms up and down his arms. "I gave so much of myself and...I almost lost my friends trying to keep her so many times and... I just wanted her to be happy. I wanted to be the reason she was happy, but...I wasn't. I didn't make her happy. I didn't make *anyone* happy... I used Jordan to get over El and he knew it. Made sense that he wanted to hit me. I deserved it. I always have."

"You never deserved that. Not for a minute," Richie said, placing a warm kiss to the side of Mike's neck and squeezing him impossibly tighter—but only for a moment. "You're so much stronger than that shit. Fuck anyone who says otherwise."

"Otherwise," Mike echoed, knowing he was too exhausted to do anything even if Richie took him up on the halfhearted offer.

Warm lips traced his neck, chased by the scrape of stubble, but nothing else happened. It seemed Richie was probably feeling just as shredded and wrecked as he was. Mike had the thought that Richie probably needed more medicine, more water, but didn't get the chance to voice his concern.

"They should be back any time," Richie said, sounding neither disappointed nor eager.

"I left the tablet upstairs. I don't know if Beverly messaged me or not..."

"I don't remember the last time I saw my phone," Richie said, his hands dropping down to Mike's waist—his crushing hold finally giving way. "Please don't hate me when I'm back at work and I text once every twelve hours. I always lose my phone."

Mike forced himself to chuckle, then shifted around until he was laying down with his head in Richie's lap. Richie's fingers began carding slowly through his hair, caressing his cheek every now and then as he let his eyes slip closed.

He loved the tenderness, but he hoped that by tomorrow things would be back to normal—Richie cracking jokes and Mike pretending he wasn't about to laugh at every one. It was that humor, that playfulness, that distracted him from how sore and painful his body was—how scared and sad he was. He needed it back. He needed it more than the painkillers.

"You know... Not to be romantic or anything," Richie started, his fingers massaging small circles into Mike's scalp, "but your face looks really good buried in my crotch."

"Not what you said last night," Mike grumbled, thinking back to their foray into the bedroom the previous evening. He thought things had been going well. He'd managed to get Richie in the mood, managed to put his mouth to use, and then the man had pulled him back up into a kiss a refused to let him go. At first he'd thought Richie might be the type who enjoyed tasting himself on his partner's tongue, but when Richie kept stopping him, he realized it had to be something else—something he'd done wrong. He just didn't know what...

Richie groaned, the noise broken up with a bit of laughter as he leaned down and pressed a kiss to Mike's cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whined, still chuckling to himself at some joke Mike didn't think was funny for once.

"You still haven't said what I did wrong," Mike murmured, rubbing his cheek on Richie's thigh as the man resume caressing his hair.

"You didn't do *anything* wrong," Richie argued, his smile coming through in his voice. Fucker was still laughing...

"Was I bad or something?" Mike asked, feeling more and more self-conscious by the second. He really couldn't handle much more tonight and he wasn't sure if he was about to start yelling or sobbing again.

"No—No, no, no! You were great. Don't get the wrong idea. I just—" Richie was cut off by the sound of the garage door opening, Beverly and the others returning to the condo. "Shit. Babe, I haven't gotten checked out in a while," Richie said quickly, his voice hushed as if he thought his friends would hear him all the way through the walls and door to the garage. "I've been with, like, forty people in the last year. I don't want to give you something. Just let me get checked out by my doctor first and then you can do with me what you will," Richie said, speaking more and more rapidly as the garage door closed and voices filled up the garage.

Loud and boisterous voices that immediately cut off as soon as the door to the condo opened—echoed by Beverly's incessant shushing.

Mike sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes as everyone shuffled in—obviously very drunk excluding Beverly. There was a distinct rustling of paper bags, shoes thumping off onto the floor, and hushed, drunken chuckling before Richie's friends all peered around the corner into the unlit living room. Mike hadn't even realized they were sitting in the dark.

"He's alive!" Bill shouted, followed by a bout of unruly laughter from Ben as the kitchen light clipped on, casting weird shadows across their faces and the floor.

“Bill!” Beverly snapped, peeking around the corner into the room just long enough to scowl, her voice a harsh whisper that seemed to remind her friend of the reason Richie had not joined them on their outing. Ben continued chuckling while Mr. Hanlon bit back his own laughter as he slid past the living room in order to duck into the bathroom and shut the door.

“It’s fine,” Richie said, slowly getting up from the couch as if to make room for the others to sit down.

Not wanting to end up seated next to Bill, and perhaps to avoid being separated from Richie, Mike stood up as well and moved to follow Richie into the kitchen. He didn’t miss the way Richie cringed from the light, pity swelling in his chest—even more pity than he already felt for the man after hearing his story. Seeing him hurt left Mike feeling helpless and devastated, even from something as small as a headache.

“How are you feeling, Honey?” Beverly asked Richie, putting a hand on his shoulder as he opened the cabinet to get more Excedrin—and ibuprofen and Tylenol. That alone had Mike’s heart-rate spiking. Was Richie still in a *lot* of pain? Could he mix all of those? When was the last time he’d had a drink of water? He needed to stay hydrated or the migraine would just get worse!

Mike shuffled to stay just out of Richie’s way as the man moved between the cabinets—going from the one holding his pill bottles to the one holding glasses and cups.

“Better. I don’t feel like puking anymore—what’s this?” Richie was distracted by several paper bags on the counter, abandoning the bottle of pills he’d just grabbed, leaving Mike with the task of getting him water and setting out the capsules.

“We got you some takeout—”

“From your store?” Richie asked, pulling at the thin, rope handle of a very distinct Marsh Brand black bag.

“Oh! No, that’s for Mike—that’s for you,” Beverly said, snatching the bag away from Richie who pretended to be offended.

Mike, still holding the capsules for Richie, stared at her. He was too exhausted, too drained to handle this. He didn't *want* gifts. He didn't *want* Richie's friends to be buying things for him out of pity. Beverly had already done so much for him. She got him breakfast and listened to his sob story, got the others out of the condo so he and Richie could spend time alone together—she didn't *need* to be buying him clothes too!

“Are these for me?” Richie asked, seeming to notice the pills in Mike's hands for the first time. “Shit, I forgot what I came in here for. Getting senile. You're going to put me in the nursing home before my next birthday.” Richie took the pills from Mike's hand while pressing a quick kiss to his cheek that Mike was so anxious he almost missed.

The TV turned on in the living room and the volume was turned up higher than it should have been while Bill and Ben hollered together about some game before laughing.

“I'm so sorry,” Beverly whispered, rolling her eyes as she stepped away from the kitchen to scold her boyfriend and turn down the television. As she was coming back into the room, Mr. Hanlon was stepping out the bathroom, drying his hands on his jeans.

“Are you feeling better, Rich?” Mr. Hanlon asked.

“Well, I was,” Richie said before tossing back his Excedrin and pain meds with a mouthful of water. “You guys interrupted our Skinemax marathon right before the big climax.”

“You're gross,” Mike mumbled, refilling Richie's glass of water when the man handed it back to him.

“Beep-Beep, Richie,” Beverly said, rolling her eyes again while carefully removing the containers of food from one of the paper bags. “Mike, I got you a burger, Sweetie. Hope that's okay. Richie, I got that chicken thing you were talking about.”

“You guys went *without me*?” Richie asked, his attention shifting to the food being laid out on the counter. He did seem better, Mike thought as he watched them interact. His eyes were still squinted from the piercing overhead light in the kitchen, but he was more

animated than he had been all day.

“How are you feeling, Mike?” Mr. Hanlon asked, tapping Mike’s shoulder—jerking him out of his thoughts.

“Fine—why?” Mike asked before realizing the correct response was supposed to be ‘fine, how are you’.

“We got a little worried when we didn’t hear back from you earlier.”

“We—We were asleep,” Mike said, looking back toward Richie who was picking up a fried chicken breast out of the plastic container with his bare hands. “We were napping,” he reiterated, wondering if it sounded more or less convincing the second time around.

“It looks like it did him some...good.” Mr. Hanlon’s words trailed off as Richie subsequently dropped the breast he’d been holding. It bounced off the counter and onto the floor where he hastily scooped it up, shouting about the “five second rule” before tossing the chicken breast back into the plastic box.

“Tits hit the floor harder than Mrs. K’s when her bra comes off,” Richie tacked on.

“You would’ve loved to see that, wouldn’t you?” Beverly asked, earning the heartiest laugh from Richie that Mike had heard all day.

He had no idea why, but he felt his face heating up. How was it even *possible* for Richie’s laugh to get to him in *that* way?

There was too much happening and his stomach was tying itself in knots while he watched Richie’s mouth form words he couldn’t hear.

He didn’t want to eat but felt bad for his lack of appetite as Richie started putting his food carefully onto a plate. He wanted to go upstairs and lay down but he didn’t want to leave Richie’s side.

Mr. Hanlon was talking to him again and Mike didn’t have the strength left to hear him. The television in the other room sounded deafening. Mike felt his heart start pounding even harder.

“Babe, you need to try this,” Richie said—his voice managing to cut

through all the noise, ringing out like a gunshot. “It’s my favorite restaurant.” He was pointing at the burger with one hand while the other fumbled with a roll of paper towels. His fingers were shining with grease from the burger, from the fried chicken breast he’d dropped on the floor, and Mike was reeling from how torn he was between sheer panic (for no fucking reason) and his impulsive desire to put Richie’s fingers in his mouth and suck them clean. How was it even *possible* to have a panic attack while being turned on?

“Babe, huh? Aren’t you two getting cozy,” Beverly said, winking at Mike who felt his stomach flip.

All he wanted was to take care of Richie—to hear him laugh and see him smiling like he had been the day before. He needed that—he needed it now. He needed to know that Richie wasn’t in pain, wasn’t hurting or sick or scared. Mike wanted to pay attention to him and make him *happy*, but there were too many people here. He couldn’t have Richie to himself, couldn’t pull Richie away. He couldn’t *do* anything.

He wanted to go upstairs so badly that a very childish, juvenile part of him wanted to cry. There were too many people, all wanting his attention, and too much noise. There was so much information spinning around and around in his head—from monsters to ex-lovers to Richie admitting he might have caught *something* from a stranger, from food he didn’t want and clothes he didn’t want being pushed under his nose.

Mike didn’t realize that he’d been staring at a single corner of the room until his vision was obstructed by Richie’s shoulder, the man coming in to hold him—warm hands suddenly rubbing up and down his back. He buried his face in Richie’s neck, blocking out the light. He didn’t realize until he was caged in Richie’s arms again that he was shaking. He was so *exhausted*, so overwhelmed. He didn’t want food, he didn’t want Beverly wasting more money on him... He wanted to go upstairs. He wanted Richie to take him upstairs...but he didn’t want to be rude either.

He had to look so ungrateful. He hadn’t even said thank you...

He wasn’t hugging Richie back, he realized. Immediately, as if on

reflex, his arms wound themselves around Richie's waist, squeezing him tightly.

Behind Richie, Beverly and Mr. Hanlon started talking to one another about a day trip to Palm Springs.

"Too soon?" Richie asked, his voice sounding hesitant.

"I want to go upstairs," Mike said, shame flooding him as he realized his voice was shaking as hard as the rest of him.

"Shit, if fondling breasts in front of my friends is what gets you hot, we're going to have to find a way to keep them here another week or two."

"I need to go upstairs," Mike repeated, feeling a tear cut down his cheek and soak into Richie's shirt when he tried to laugh for the joke.

"You creamed your pants just from that?" Richie asked, his voice low and right next to Mike's ear so his friends wouldn't overhear.

Mike groaned, knowing Richie was trying to cheer him up but feeling more and more drained by the second.

"Okay, okay. I'll get your bag, say you're trying stuff on. You can go lay down. Play with the tablet... Send me some nudes—"

"You're so gross," Mike whimpered, hugging Richie tighter despite himself as more tears escaped his eyes.

"Bev, we're going to try on these clothes and I'll be back down," Richie said, pulling himself out of Mike's arms and reaching for the Marsh Brands bag.

"Oh—Oh, okay," Beverly said, her tone going from neutral to concerned the moment she saw Mike's face. Quickly, he wiped at his tears, but knew it was too little too late. Everyone was staring at him now and he felt infinitely more pathetic than he ever had. "Mike, let me know if they don't fit, okay? I can get you a bigger size or smaller. Or if you don't like them, I can get you something else—"

"Did you get him the assless chaps like I asked?" Richie asked,

cutting off Beverly's sickeningly-sweet words.

"Richie," Beverly snapped, her voice sounding dangerously close to Mike's mother's when she was pissed.

"It's been a long day, huh?" Mr. Hanlon was saying, patting Mike's shoulder gently. Mike tried to answer him, but the words kept getting caught in his throat.

It was after another painful exchange of unappreciated jokes from Richie that Mike was finally led upstairs. Richie set the bag of clothes and his tablet, retrieved from the floor in the hallway, on the bed and then circled back to close the bedroom door—shutting out the noise, closing them off from the rest of the world.

"Everything okay?" Richie asked, caressing Mike's cheek gently—his thumb ghosting over Mike's bottom lip.

Mike stared up at him, feeling ashamed, feeling guilty for taking him away from his friends yet again after having Richie to himself all day. Jordan used to call him out for being clingy, even before they'd officially become a couple. It was his downfall—the one surefire trait he had that drove all of his partners away. Even El... He was clingy and needy, always in need of attention, always in need of reassurance.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Tired," Mike croaked out, flinching away from the touch he actively craved, in the hope that he'd look less desperate.

"Yeah... It's been a rough day," Richie said, his eyes tracing the floor as if he were searching for something. "Do you want me to stay up here for a bit? I can lay down with you. Do that thing you like—you know, where I shut my mouth for longer than five seconds? Don't worry—Don't worry. It drove all my exes crazy too. One of my best moves in the sack. Swear to God."

"Stop," Mike said, smiling despite himself as Richie pulled him into another hug. "It's just... It—"

"It's a lot. I know. Trust me... I'm not holding out much better," he

said, his voice taking on a serious tone even as he pressed a trail of kisses down the side of Mike's neck. "I'm probably going to hang out a couple hours and come to bed. Gotta figure out what we're doing tomorrow and then...I just want to sleep. My head feels like shit and I just want to sleep." He let out a heavy sigh, his breath hot on Mike's throat—sending a small shiver of pleasure down his spine. "I just want to be *alone* with you."

The way he said it—the way his voice broke as if he, too, were on the verge of tears despite his performance downstairs—left Mike's chest aching as Richie pulled away from him.

"I'll take my phone with me," Richie said, picking the device up from his nightstand. "Text me if you need me. Feel free to send nudes. I don't think Beverly would appreciate it if I returned the favor though."

"Go away," Mike said, refusing to laugh. He got another kiss for his efforts and then Richie was gone, closing the bedroom door behind him.

Alone felt only somewhat better than being downstairs with the crowd. He could still hear Richie's voice which soothed him the same way it had his first night in the condo, but he was lonely—the king-sized bed feeling empty with just his own body laying in it.

He had set the bag of clothes Beverly had bought for him on the floor without looking inside, unable to work up the motivation to shower or change into pajamas let alone try on different outfits.

Mike did, however, check the tablet—not surprised in the slightest when Richie sent him a screenshot of a burnt sausage with the message "ready when you are" underneath. Mike replied with a meme, then stared at the queue of messages in his inbox which grew impossibly longer. His mother had joined the list of unanswered texts, her message preview reading, "Would love to hear from..." which left him feeling more broken down than he already was.

Nancy had answered him and Mike felt he had just enough strength left to open her message, even if he found himself unable to reply.

She had sent a heart in response to his carefully arranged selfie, then added, “Looking good!” A little while after that she asked where he was and who he was with.

Mike stared at her messages then slowly typed a reply, pausing after every other word.

“A lot happened. I’m really sorry. I’m in LA right now but I’m safe. I met someone and he’s really nice. I know how it sounds and I know I’m stupid but he’s a good guy. He saved me from Jordan and he’s getting me back on my feet. I promise I’m OK.”

He sent the message and stared at his screen, feeling numb even as Richie sent him another message.

“Do you want your coffee??? It’s getting cold.” With a frowning emoji.

Coffee did sound good, but Mike ended up saying no—simply because he didn’t want Richie making an extra trip upstairs just to bring it to him.

Nancy replied to him and Mike found himself settling into the conversation, trying to remind himself that all he needed to do to escape was set the tablet aside. Nancy, though, was a lot less forceful than he expected—less pushy than Jonathan, less irritated than Mike had expected her to be.

Maybe she realized that yelling at him wouldn’t get her anywhere.

“A new guy??? Is he at least cute?”

“I think so.”

“Any pictures?”

“Not yet. Soon. Promise.”

“Whatever. As long as he’s not old and gross like Jordan.”

Mike sent the sweat-drop emoji, earning the shifty eyes back from his sister.

“How old is this one.....” And then, “How did YOU end up with daddy issues?” once he’d told her.

“I don’t have daddy issues! He’s just nice.”

“He’s old enough to be our dad. What do you even have in common?”

“LOTR?”

“You can’t build a relationship on Lord of the Rings loser..... He’d better be cute.”

Mike backed out of her message to answer another incoming one from Richie.

“Bev says UR coming to Palm Springs.”

“My sisters says you’d better be cute,” Mike answered, trying to think of a more direct way to tell Richie there was no way he was going to Palm Springs, whatever the hell that was.

“Is she interested?? I go both ways!” Winking emoji, winking emoji, “JK!!!”

“I’m not going to tell them you’re you. I don’t want them to freak out.”

“They wouldn’t believe you anyway. I’m way too hot for you. Seriously. I think I have a fever. Thinking of you alone in my bed gets me H O T.” Each sentence its own message, making Mike toll his eyes. And then, “You can if you want. Or I can be your Dirty Little Secret~ ~” Glasses emoji, sunglasses emoji.

“I don’t want that kind of attention,” Mike said, clicking back onto Nancy’s message once he’d hit send. To her, he said, “He is.” Shrugging emoji.

They chatted a bit longer, Mike distracting her with questions about the wedding and her and Jonathan. She sent photos of dresses and bouquets and other girly things he pretended to have excitement for. It was the most he’d been able to talk to her in over a year and his

heart both soared and ached.

“Well tell your mystery boy if he hurts you I’ll kick his ass. Jonathan and I still have those bear traps. We know how to use them.”

In the back of his mind, Mike heard Richie’s voice making an inappropriate joke about bear traps and kinkiness in the bedroom. He preferred it a lot more than the nearly non-stop muttering of Jordan’s criticisms.

“Bear trap?? That’s how I caught Richie in da club!” Mike typed, shaking his head at the awful joke before hitting send. In no world, parallel or otherwise, could Richie be considered a bear—but Nancy didn’t need to know that.

She sent him two side-eye emojis and the gasping cat. “DADDY ISSUES!!!!!”

“He prefers to go by Grandpa.”

More gasping cats and then, “I’m buying a plane ticket. This is an intervention. Not acceptable!”

“He’s not really that old,” Mike said, feeling a small twinge of guilt for making Richie the butt of his joke without the man there to defend himself.

“Is he on Facebook?? Can I please see a pic? I won’t show Jonathan or mom! Promise.”

Mike toggled back to Richie’s messages. “She wants a pic. She thinks you’re a bear.”

“Roar??”

Mike sent him the side eye.

“Are you calling me fat?? I am hurt.” The message was promptly followed by a selfie of Richie and Ben who was clearly drunk and laughing at the camera. “Here ya go. Let her think you landed a hottie.”

Mike stared at the photo, looking more at Richie than Ben—smiling to himself because it was for him. The photo was for *him*. Richie was smiling in his crooked little way, his blue eyes shining through the sheen on his glasses.

“I did,” Mike typed, adding a heart and switching back to Nancy’s messages.

He sent the photo, biting his lip as he watched the message go from delivered to read, to the ellipses showing his sister was typing. Would she recognize Richie from one photo? And if she did, if she had heard of him and knew him enough to recognize him, would she believe that Mike had actually met him?

“Did you get adopted by a gay couple!?”

It took Mike a moment, but he figured out how to take a screenshot with the tablet and sent it to Richie. A few seconds later he heard laughter erupt from downstairs, Richie’s voice ringing out over everyone else. He could faintly hear Beverly going, “no—no, no! Don’t you dare!” while laughing just as hard.

Mike found himself staring at the screen, waiting for the photo that inevitably came through of Richie kissing Ben’s cheek while the other man visibly tried to shove him away. Beverly’s cheek and chin were in the corner of the frame, laughing.

“Tell her yes and there’s room for a daughter.”

“Fuck No.”

Downstairs, the laughter continued, Richie starting to lead into some joke that Beverly was desperately trying to put a stop to. Mike clicked back onto Nancy messages, feeling relieved and pleased that she didn’t recognize Richie from his comedy show.

“Which is he? The beard or no beard?”

“No beard?” Mike texted back.

“Eh, he’s ok.... Who’s the cute one?”

“Richie,” Mike answered.

“No, the actually cute one.”

“Richie.”

“The other one.”

“The not cute one?”

“Sure. He single?”

“You’re engaged!”

“That can change!!”

“Ben. And he’s taken.”

“By Richie?”

Again, in the back of his mind, Mike heard Richie’s voice cracking jokes. “In his dreams!”

“By who?”

“His girlfriend.”

“Are you in a thruple? Do you need help???”

Downstairs, Beverly was screaming “Beep-Beep, Richie!” over and over while shrieking with laughter.

Despite the tightness that lingered in his chest and the fact that his eyes felt like they would stay permanently closed if he blinked too slowly, Mike found himself comfortable. He felt relaxed in a way he didn’t realize he hadn’t been able to feel since that night in the hotel.

Richie hadn’t had a single thing to drink all day and yet he’d sent Mike a photo, gave Mike permission to send it to his sister—to share his picture, to be associated with him. Maybe, Mike thought—Maybe, he hoped, this could all be real. Maybe Richie could be his.

12. Chapter 12

Notes for the Chapter:

Some smut, some angst, some fluff--you're all on a roller coaster this chapter!

Hi, friends! I am currently off work and dog sitting in my parents' remote home, which means one thing: Writer's Retreat! I have written up to Chapter 14 already, but want to make sure the pacing stays consistent and that the plot keeps moving and I'm not writing filler for the sake of filler. No one wants to get bogged down with unnecessary scenes. So I won't be doing a triple post or anything crazy tonight.

One of the dogs I am sitting is very sick though, so if I go dark for a while it is because she has passed. She is a very sweet girl and may be nearing the end of her time with us, which is sad.

Mike awoke to something warm and wet stroking his cheek. He flinched on reflex, eyes snapping open to focus on Richie leaning over top of him. The bedside lamp was on, tinting Richie's skin with a warm yellow glow. Mike's mind immediately flickered to the night they'd met, the way Richie had looked in the streetlights. Then he was brought back to the bedroom by that warm, soft wetness running down his neck which he cringed away from, trying to ask what was wrong but only managing to murmur a bit as Richie smiled at him.

"Hey. You fell asleep in your makeup. I was washing it off for you," Richie said, smiling at him so tenderly as he wiped the cloth down Mike's neck once again. "I was gonna kiss it off, but it tastes like shoe polish."

Mike opened his mouth to answer, but his words came out a soft moan as the cloth dragged across the sensitive part of his neck.

"You know," Richie whispered, leaning down so his lips were pressed

close to Mike's ear—the cloth making small circles over the hickey that had been buried under layers of makeup. “Everyone's down in the basement playing Mario Kart.”

“Yeah?” Mike whispered, his eyes fluttering closed as Richie's lips trailed down his throat.

“Yeah.” The warm cloth slid down Mike's cheek, traced with kisses until his face was clean and the cloth was set aside on the nightstand. Richie set his glasses down beside it, then clipped off the lamp before slowly climbing over Mike on the bed.

Instinctively, Mike's arms wrapped around Richie's shoulders, pulling him into his chest. He smelled of that expensive cologne again and his mouth tasted of cinnamon toothpaste as it closed over Mike's. He parted his lips, taking Richie's tongue into his mouth and sucking it, tracing it with his own until he got the older man to moan. Mike slid his legs apart, inviting Richie to shift between them—the man's torso falling heavy and secure against his own.

Mike found himself clawing at Richie's shirt, grappling for the hem and pulling—practically tearing at it until Richie broke off their heated kiss with a small chuckle and sat up just long enough to pull the shirt off over his head. Mike stared at him, watching absolutely transfixed—drinking in what he could in the pale light bleeding in from the parted curtains. His hands reached for the waistband of Richie's jeans, the tips of his fingers dipping beneath the hem—sliding across his soft stomach, relishing the scrape of the dark hairs leading down his chest.

Richie obliged him, smirking as he unfastened his belt, as he undid the top button. Mike licked his lips, his heart rate spiking as Richie started to slide his zipper down. Even the visible lust that had to be dripping off Mike's face wasn't enough to keep Richie serious though, and he did some weird dance with his hips as he shoved off his jeans and boxers. Mike rolled his eyes and flopped back against the pillows, letting Richie descend upon him—chewing on that sensitive part of his neck and suckling it until Mike was grinding their hips together.

It had been so long, too long, since he'd felt secure under another person's body instead of threatened. So long since he'd trembled with

anticipation and pleasure as opposed to fear and pain. He was so grateful for Richie, so thankful and so helplessly addicted. All he wanted was more, more, more of him until he had it all. He wanted everything Richie would give him, every sliver and splinter and scrap that Richie felt he deserved.

“Can I try something?” Richie asked, his voice close to a purr in Mike’s ear.

“Huh? Yeah—Yes. Please?” Mike whined, embarrassed by how incoherent his thoughts came out. What would Richie ask? Any fantasy he had, Mike would play along with—anything, anything.

“Do you think,” Richie started, pausing to place an open-mouthed kiss to the corner of Mike’s mouth.

What would he ask? What did he need? Mike wanted to give him everything—anything. Fuck, Richie’s voice was so powerful in his brain that Mike would lay still and let the man beat him if he asked.

“Do you think I could try to suck you off?” Richie breathed, sounding uncertain and timid in a way that made Mike yearn to hug him—and tear every stitch of fabric off himself. “It’ll suck— Wait... It’ll probably blow—wait... Shit, it’ll probably be really bad. I’ve never done this before. But if you’d like it—”

“Please?” Mike rasped, his legs wrapping around Richie’s hips. “Please—please! It won’t be bad. Promise. I promise!” Mike babbled, his hands running down Richie’s chest, squeezing his shoulders, touching as much of his bare flesh as he could.

A request, in bed, that revolved around his own pleasure? Richie was perfect. God, Richie was *fucking* perfect.

“Fuck, I love it when you beg,” Richie moaned, mouth descending on Mike’s neck again. He sucked a hickey into the other side of Mike’s throat, not letting up until Mike pushed him away in order to take his own pants and shirt off. For once, he didn’t even care about the bruises—he didn’t even remember them. The only thing in his mind was Richie, Richie, Richie.

Richie's hands sliding up and down his back. Richie's mouth on his throat, hands squeezing his hips, teeth grazing his throat, fingers curling around his cock and stroking it rough and fast. Mike cried out only to have the noise swallowed up by Richie's mouth, sucking his bottom lip and nipping it until Mike turned his face away—panting as he clutched at Richie's shoulders. He dug his nails in, just to test his luck, and was rewarded with a surprised whine of pleasure from the man over top him.

It was the most erotic sound Mike had ever heard.

He was still reeling from it when Richie's kisses started trailing down his chest and over his stomach. His whole body trembling in anticipation as Richie's hand slowed on his cock, moving to squeeze the base.

"I-I've never done this before—sorry," Richie said, his voice trembling as he pulled back. His hand resuming its previous, rough pace. Mike whimpered, bucking his hips in a way he at least hoped was appealing. It was hard trying to be sexy when Jordan's voice still barked at him in the back of his head—telling him what to do, telling him he was doing it wrong anyway.

"It's fine—It's okay i-if you don't want to—"

"No, I want to—I *want* to," Richie said, laughing nervously. "Sorry. Shit, I'm nervous."

"It's okay! You don't have to," Mike said, trying not to whimper as his hips chased the sensation of Richie's hand which had stilled. "I-I can do it for you. I'm sure you don't have anything—I'll do it."

"No, no—I *want* to." Richie took a deep breath and smiled at Mike nervously, looking timid and terrified and so adorable that Mike was about ready to give up on the mood all together just to hold him and make him feel better. "I want to," Richie repeated, kissing Mike on the corner of his mouth before, all at once, yanking Mike further down the bed by his hips and sucking the tip of his length into his mouth.

Mike let out a surprised yelp, his eyes rolling back in his head as

Richie's tongue curled around the underside of his tip. His hands scrambled for purchase, sinking into the pillow behind his head to avoid scratching Richie's back or pulling his hair. Mike had accidentally pulled Jordan's hair the one time his ex- had gone down on him after they moved in together. The blowjob had ended immediately and Mike got a taste of the cane instead.

But Richie—oh, fuck, Richie!

Mike moaned softly, trying to keep his hips still as Richie fisted what he couldn't fit in his mouth. His lips sank down a little further each time he lowered his head, enveloping Mike's cock in the soft, wet heat. His hips were twitching helplessly and he spread his legs further apart, hitching up one of his knees in hopes Richie might touch more of him.

Richie hollowed his cheeks, taking in more of Mike's length while hot trails of drool slid down around his fingers. Their touch changed from rough to slick, sending shock waves of pleasure down Mike's spine. Mike spread his leg a little more, whimpering as he let himself cant his hips the smallest bit. When he looked down, Richie's eyes were on him.

To the older man, he was probably just a smear of shadows, but Mike couldn't help the loud moan which escaped his throat. His imagination couldn't have even conjured a more perfect fantasy. Even as Richie pulled off of him—though his hand continued it's merciless stroking—Mike was shivering with pleasure, with affection.

Richie was kind. He was careful and so gentle, so much gentler than Mike deserved or was used to.

"Is this okay?" Richie asked, still sounding uncertain, even with Mike writhing beneath him.

"Yes—please don't stop. Please. Please, more," Mike begged, loving the way it made Richie moan—loving that his neediness, his lack of self-control, could actually bring another human pleasure, let alone one as wonderful as Richie.

"That good?"

“Yes. Fuck, please, Richie. Please, don’t stop.”

“So I don’t suck?” Richie asked, his little smirk audible in his voice—and just frustrating enough to make Mike growl. “Or do you want me to?”

“Richie, please!” Mike whined, bucking into the man’s hand. The saliva coating his length chilled his skin, making him tremble as the desperation began mounting. Jordan liked to keep him on edge like this, kept him wanting and hopeful and fearful all at once. Jordan would give him just enough to get close and then hurt him, or yell at him—or abandon him all together, knowing better than to touch himself. “Richie,” Mike whimpered, needing to remind himself that that’s who he was with—that he was safe here and cared for. “Please? Please—Please, touch me. Please, Richie. I need you. I-I... I need you.”

Richie moaned deep in his throat, his eyes tracing Mike’s body—his free hand sliding down his ribs to squeeze at his hip. Mike didn’t miss the way the other man’s cock twitched, just barely visible in the darkness. He wanted it—he wanted it so bad. So, so bad.

“Please,” he whined, bucking into Richie’s hand.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking hot,” Richie moaned, his hand leaving Mike’s hip in order to stroke himself in time with the hand he had wrapped around Mike’s cock.

Mike parted his legs a little more, nudging Richie just slightly with his knee. All the way—he wanted to go all the way. Why wouldn’t Richie just take him? Jordan always had. The first time they even fooled around, Mike had been weak and let him take what he wanted. Why didn’t Richie want to take him?

“You want it bad, don’t you?” Richie whispered, his voice deep and rough.

“Want you. I want you—please? Please, Richie. Please, please, please...” He whimpered, he rolled his hips, he opened his legs—anything, he’d do anything to look more engaged, more appealing, more desirable.

Richie just smirked at him, white teeth flashing in the dark. “You know I’m just a *sucker* for that,” he purred, taking his hand from his own cock in order to bring his fingers to his lips. Mike would’ve growled at him for the shitty pun if the movement didn’t have him transfixed.

He sucked two of his fingers into his mouth, wetting them—making a show of it while slowly jacking Mike’s cock. It felt like an eternity, a delicious and agonizing eternity, before the spit-slick digits were slipped inside of him. Mike cried out, his hands digging at the pillows desperately as Richie’s mouth descended on him again.

The combined sensations of Richie’s mouth and both of his hands working him inside and out left Mike gasping for air—choking on his own noises of pleasure while Richie moaned around him. It was a little clumsy and a little awkward—especially with Richie swallowing back laughter every few seconds, no doubt laughing at one of his own (thankfully unspoken) jokes—but it was the best Mike had ever had. Jordan never paid attention to him like this. With him it was quick, a fast way to get Mike in the mood back when they first used to hook up, and always a segue into something else more satisfying for himself.

Richie, though... Oh, God. Mike felt like his head was going to explode from how wonderful and overwhelming it was. Richie was pushing him to his limits with no end in sight. His fingers were curled to mercilessly rub against Mike’s prostate with each rough thrust, his tongue lapping at the underside of Mike’s cock while his lips grazed what they could fit.

It was so good—it was too good. It was so much more than he deserved.

Mike tried desperately not to buck his hips, not to gag his lover who was probably still reeling from his migraine attack, but couldn’t keep from squirming. He clawed at the pillow, then the headboard—his short nails scraping at the wooden frame until Richie’s hand and mouth were both taken off his aching cock. He let out a shrill gasp, tensing instinctively in fear of a blow, only to have Richie’s hand grab one of his and pull it down into his own hair.

Oh, fuck. This was really happening—it was really fucking happening.

Richie didn't even throw out a one-liner before going back to work. His fingers seemed to be thrusting in and out even faster, sending tremor after tremor up Mike's spine—heat coiling in the pit of his stomach as his fingers twitched against the tangles of Richie's coarse hair. He was too afraid to pull it, too afraid to hurt him, but any time his hand tensed, Richie would moan around his cock.

The sounds he made, the way his hair looked tangled around Mike's fingers—everything. Everything about it was perfect and too much. It was all too, too much and Mike barely kept from screaming as he reached his climax. His eyes had fallen closed and he was left a shaking mess, wracked as if by sobs as he felt Richie jerk away from him—suddenly cold and empty as Richie stifled a loud cough. Reflexively, even though he knew it was Richie and he was safe, Mike brought his hands up to shield his face—not even realizing he'd done it until warm fingers wrapped around his wrists and pulled them aside.

The very next moment, Richie was kissing him. His lips felt bruised and swollen already, but Mike still moaned for it—moaned for more that he knew he couldn't handle. It was sloppy and dirty and tasted one-hundred percent like himself when he sucked Richie's tongue alongside his own. His broken hand had gone back to clutching at Richie's hair gently, sliding through the choppy curls while his other hand fought to get between them—finally, finally getting to close around Richie's cock.

He swore Richie had no idea what it did to Mike just to be allowed to touch him.

Mike did all he could from the angle Richie had him pinned to the bed, whining from a twinge of pain and over-sensitivity as Richie sucked an even darker bruise into his throat. What he wouldn't give to take Richie into his mouth again, to actually finish him this time—taste him, have him. It would be worth it, he thought, even if he caught something. But Richie wouldn't let him move.

All Mike could do was pump his hand faster, relishing it each time he

felt Richie's cock pulse in his hand until a hot rope of come spilled over his fingers and dripped onto his splayed thigh.

Richie finally freed Mike's skin from between his teeth in order to huff out a sigh of pleasure—and then immediately started to laugh as if he'd been holding it in the entire time. Fucker probably had...

"What?" Mike whined, eyes slipping closed as all of Richie's weight collapsed onto his chest at once. He felt pinned, but not trapped. It still baffled him every time Richie could make him vulnerable, could put Mike completely at his mercy, and not frighten him at all. "Why are you laughing at me?" Mike asked when Richie continued chuckling into the crook of his neck.

"I thought up," a pause for laughter, "I thought up, like—" Another fit of childlike, loud giggles, "Shit, I thought up, like, eighteen dick jokes the whole time I was down there," Richie said, taking three tries to get all of the words out.

"Any worth sharing?" Mike asked, rolling his eyes and feeling only half amused as he shuffled to get comfortable under Richie's weight. One hand was contentedly stroking Richie's hair, the other rubbing up and down the older man's back—gliding along on the sheen of sweat there.

"Some," Richie laughed. "*But they're all too long.*" He laughed so loud then, at his own stupid joke, right into Mike's ear.

Just this once, Mike told himself, he'd let Richie win and laugh for him. Just this once.

"Some..." Richie had to stop to choke on more, thankfully stifled and nearly silent, laughter. "Some are just a mouthful."

"You're not funny," Mike said, rolling his eyes as he hooked the leg Richie wasn't crushing over his hip. Richie chuckled out a few more puns and one-liners before settling down. He seemed pleased with himself—pleased with Mike—and after sneaking off to the bathroom, laid at Mike's side beneath the covers to cuddle him. He had his chin rested on the top of Mike's head and their legs tangled together while Mike hugged him with one arm.

“Have I told you I really fuckin’ like you? Because I *really* fuckin’ like you,” Richie said, voice rough with sleep. Mike took a deep breath, waiting for the punchline that didn’t come, then let it out with a smile.

“I like you, too,” he said, feeling a warmth spread through his whole body as he nestled closer. *Like*, he was afraid, wasn’t about to cover it.

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For years, Beverly had been plagued by nightmares. Images of strangers—strangers she now remembered as friends—dying in horrific ways, dying of diseases that weakened the brain long before the body, dying by their own hands. She had seen Stan die many times before it happened. She saw this beautiful, young man she would never again get to meet going from vibrant to agonized to lifeless. She had seen Eddie die, though not in the way he eventually had. She had seen Bill dissolve into madness and Ben give in to his solitude in a beautiful house with more windows than walls.

She had seen Richie die... She saw a corpse, bloated and left to decay in the darkness—a television playing late night specials with the volume up way too high in order to fill the emptiness of the house. Or what she’d always thought of as a house. It was his condo, the condo they were all visiting—and the room he’d drank himself to death in was the same living room where Richie was drinking coffee now, laughing at a morning show with Mike’s head in his lap.

Richie was the only one she still had nightmares about.

Her anxieties surrounding it bordered on maddening whenever she saw photos online of Richie out drinking with other comedians, whenever he sent one of his strange text messages, whenever he cracked open a beer in his own kitchen.

Her nightmares about him *reeked* of booze and rot. It was no way to die, she wanted to tell him. Drinking himself into heart failure was not the way to go.

What made it worse, what made it entirely so, so much worse, was

Richie had seen it too.

In the Deadlights.

He hadn't been caught in them very long, not like Beverly, but he'd seen enough. He saw Stan die, he saw Eddie die, he saw *himself* die...

He saw how he would die and didn't do a damned thing to try to change it beside crack self-deprecating jokes and laugh the whole thing off.

That scared her more than anything.

Every day that passed, she feared she'd see it flashed across the news. This Just In: Richie Tozier Dead at 42, Discovered by Housekeeper.

Everyone who knew him at his studio or in LA would just spew statements about never seeing it coming—that he was always so happy and quick to liven the mood.

Who would've *guessed* that he was struggling with depression? Who would've *known* he was an alcoholic?

Days would pass and the press would be digging up all the dirt they could find. Someone somewhere would start a smear campaign and his memory would be ruined because no one in Hollywood got to die a good person.

Beverly couldn't stand to see that happen.

Maybe it was cruel or insensitive or selfish, but Beverly had such high expectations for Mike. He gave Richie a distraction. He gave Richie something else to focus on and worry about—to take care of and feel proud of. Every day, Richie could tell himself that *because he lived*, Mike had been saved. *Because he'd lived*, Mike's bruises were fading, his bones were healing. *Because he'd lived*, no one was going to hurt that boy again.

Richie had saved him and Mike was dependent on him. Maybe... maybe with Mike here, Richie would take better care of himself so Mike wouldn't be left on his own. Or maybe Mike would take care of Richie, or they could take care of *each other*.

Like now, like right now, when Richie was laughing and stroking Mike's hair and Mike was rolling his eyes at some joke shared between the two of them before reaching up with his good hand to stroke Richie's cheek. It was the small things, those loving stares and little gestures, that filled Beverly with hope. Mike couldn't fake that much affection, could he?

On the couch, Richie was laughing so hard at something he'd said to get himself going that he had to set his coffee mug down so he wouldn't spill any on Mike who still hadn't moved from his lap.

"You're stupid—You're so stupid!" Mike was saying, though laughter came through under his irritation. "You're not funny!"

"Good to see him back on his feet," Ben said, sliding behind Beverly in the kitchen to get more coffee.

"Yeah..." She heard him tack on more, but couldn't focus to form much of a reply. She was watching Richie, trying to determine if his smile was genuine or not as Mike let another one of his jokes fall flat.

Genuine. It had to be. And if it wasn't, it certainly was after Mike sat up just long enough to give Richie a peck on the lips before settling back down. Richie was grinning so much his eyes closed, meaning he missed the affectionate stare Mike was giving him from his lap.

Beverly had doubts that, during their alone time the previous day, Mike had told Richie any of the things he'd told her when they'd gone out to breakfast. Her first suspicion came when Mike refused to make eye contact with her when she and the others came inside, keeping his gaze downcast as if he were ashamed of something. She hoped he understood that it was fine they hadn't gotten to talk, especially given Richie's migraine attack. (She hadn't experienced one firsthand before, but Richie had described one over text in the past and it hadn't sounded pleasant.) From what Ben had told her, too, Richie seemed an absolute wreck when he woke up to find Mike gone. He didn't check his phone and spent however long that morning panicking, thinking Mike had run away from him. How much of his distress, the shaking and agitation Ben described, was anxiety and how much was the migraine was still up for debate.

So with those factors in play, it seemed reasonable that the subject wouldn't come up naturally. Beverly could imagine that Mike would be too anxious to bring up something so stressful when Richie was already unwell. Beverly had known better than to say much of anything at all to Tom when he was sick with so much as a head cold.

Something had definitely changed between them, though. That Beverly couldn't deny. Her first thought was that they'd taken advantage of their *alone* time, but the more she thought about it, the less it made sense. They'd clearly already had one another, and it was doubtful Richie would have been able to do anything physical given how much it seemed to hurt him just to move around his kitchen or hold a paper bag.

Maybe it hadn't been about Jordan, but something had been discussed. Something had changed... The two were certainly clinging closer to one another when she and the rest of the Losers returned to the condo (and absolutely inseparable this morning), but something seemed off. Mike had started crying when he'd been given food and Beverly's gift from her shop. He'd seemed so tired and so overwhelmed... Richie took him upstairs and then was back within minutes, acting like nothing was wrong.

"He's just tired. I put him down for his nap," he'd joked. They all talked, then went downstairs to drunkenly play video games—except Richie. He didn't play and he didn't drink. He watched, nodded along, smoked a cigarette out by the pool with Beverly in silence, and then went up to bed.

Their room was silent all night—or as far as Beverly was concerned once she corralled a very drunk Ben into the guest room—and then, in the morning, Richie was up before all of them with Mike at his side. Mike had made breakfast for the two of them which they'd eaten before anyone else was up, and had been rinsing the dishes when Ben and Beverly came down. Coffee was made; Richie was on his third cup with no end in sight. They'd exchanged morning pleasantries, Beverly noticed the two new bruises chewed into Mike's poor neck (Richie seriously was a giant teenager who never grew up), and then Mike made them a fresh pot of coffee before following Richie into the living room.

They had been watching morning talk shows for the better part of two hours, Richie making fun of the various hostesses and doing impressions of the men—trying to get Mike to laugh.

Bill got up and said little more than good morning to the happy couple before hurrying to the coffee pot as if he'd die in minutes without taking a sip.

"They keep you up again?" Bill asked Ben as the man handed him a mug.

"Not last night," Ben answered, chuckling. He'd drunkenly brought up the fact that Richie had woken them up the previous night and Bill had been absolutely mortified. Beverly understood where he was coming from—especially given the fact that the resemblance between the two was really disconcerting—but Mike seemed to make Richie *happy*. He wasn't a con artist, wasn't a sleaze strung out on drugs; he was just a scared, awkward boy who had run into exactly the right person at exactly the right time.

"Could've fooled me," Bill mumbled, adding a miniscule but of sugar to his cup and swirling it around before taking a sip. "Looks like we're already about to get a show and it's not even nine."

"Richie looks better," Beverly said, not-so-unintentionally loud.

"What'd I do?" Richie called from the living room.

"More like who'd y—you know, never mind. Just, never mind," Bill said, shaking his head before adding more sugar to his coffee.

"Isn't that one of my lines?" Richie asked, squirming around until Mike sat up so that he could get up from the couch. Beverly couldn't hide her smile as Mike immediately followed after him, carrying both of their coffee mugs. He followed Richie like a duckling and it was precious.

"What's our plan for today? Anything?" Bill asked. "Or are we waiting for Mike to wake up?"

"Uh... I think he was the one with the game plan. I'm just the host. Activities Director wasn't on my Airbnb listing."

“Yeah, but you’re the one who knows where everything is,” Beverly said, offering him a wink.

“You’ve got Google Maps. You can figure it out,” Richie said playfully, pouring himself what was left in the coffee pot into Mike’s mug as opposed to his own. He took his own cup back while pressing a kiss to the boy’s head that no one but Beverly seemed to notice—and as soon as Mike realized she noticed, his face turned dark red in embarrassment.

Richie was over the moon for Mike—anyone who looked at them together could see it—and Mike so very clearly felt the same. If only Bill could put aside his suspicions for just ten minutes and see it for himself. There were few things better to observe in the world than a requited love matched step for step, and Beverly honestly couldn’t get enough.

“Are you coming with us today?” Bill asked, looking to Mike who froze like a deer in headlights, then turned to look at Richie—wanting fed the correct answer, or to have it spoken for him. How Bill could ever doubt that Mike was abused was beyond Beverly’s ability to comprehend. It was so clearly obvious in the way he talked and the way he moved—every mannerism seemingly bred out of the fear of getting struck or put down.

“Nah, he’s got a date with that Skinemax channel again.”

“Richie,” Mike complained, his voice teetering between a whine and a growl.

“Not today,” Richie said, winking at Mike while leaning casually back against the counter. “He had to deal with me for a full twenty-four hours. I think he deserves a break.”

“You are a lot to handle,” Beverly chimed in, speaking over Bill before he could say something unintentionally hurtful.

“If Mike’s not coming, why not go to the beach?” Ben suggested. “We didn’t make it yesterday. That way we can save Palm Springs and the rest of the sightseeing for another time. Maybe when Mike’s feeling more up to it.”

Being included in the plans at all seemed to set the boy on edge more so than comfort him. He stiffened and looked to Richie again, earning little more than a humored smile—as if Richie were just silently saying, “See? They like you.”

“You don’t have to make plans around me,” Mike stammered, his voice shaking so hard it would’ve given Bill a run for his money back in middle-school. “Please! I’m not that important. I’ll be here forever—or...or as long as I can. I can see this stuff any time. You don’t have to wait for me.”

“But it’d be more fun with you there,” Ben said.

“Yeah, Richie would have someone he can use all that old material on so we don’t have to fake laugh out of pity anymore,” Bill tacked on.

“What!? You guys have been faking it? This whole time?” Richie asked, clutching his chest as if genuinely wounded.

“Don’t listen to them,” Beverly said, more so to Mike than Richie. “Don’t do anything you’re not comfortable with, okay? But if you do want to go, just tell me and I’ll get—er—these covered up for you,” she said, gesturing to her own neck.

Mike’s face turned an even darker shade of scarlet as his palm clapped around the right side of his neck.

“Huh? Oh—Wow, burnt yourself with the hair curler again,” Richie said, his face heating up the smallest bit too.

“Dude, that’s not fooling anyone,” Ben said, rolling his eyes, prompting a terrible grin from Richie who looked far too pleased with himself.

“What? He got bit by my snake. Had to suck the venom out,” Richie said, eyes glued to Mike so he could watch the boy’s frustrated reaction.

“You’re so nasty,” Mike mumbled.

“Rich... That’s disgusting, dude,” Bill complained, shaking his head

before taking another sip of coffee. “We’re not in high school anymore. Well... Some of us aren’t.”

It surprised Beverly the smallest bit when Mike actually met Bill’s gaze and snapped out a quick, clipped, “I graduated early. Four-point-three GPA.”

“Well, that’s impressive,” Richie said, his eyebrow quirking in surprise.

“And yet somehow you fell for this idiot?” Bill asked, gesturing to Richie.

“Hey! I might not have been on the honor roll, but I had good grades —”

“Up until senior year when you started hooking up with Casey Smolik,” Ben chimed in.

“Ah, that’s right! Casey Small-Tits!” Richie exclaimed, laughing heartily before taking a long drink of coffee to hide how red his face was getting.

“Remember that time the football coach caught you under the bleachers?” Ben asked.

“Wait—I’m sorry, what’s this?” Beverly cut in, laughing.

“Oh, shit—yeah! No, so there I was, taking Casey Small-Tits to pound town during free-period...” The story grew more and more explicit with each passing sentence, Richie putting on voices and moving around the kitchen as if recreating the whole scene. Mike hid his face in his hands the entire time, seemingly mortified, though more or less just hiding the fact that the story actually got him to laugh. “So then they tell me *her* dad’s coming in and, I shit you not—Beverly, not even kidding—I bit my own tongue so hard they had to rush me to the emergency room for stitches on the spot! Me, bit through my tongue hard enough to need *stitches*! Couldn’t talk for a *week*! Worth it, too! There was no way in Hell I was looking her dad in the face!”

“If I were your parents, I would’ve suggested they amputate,” Bill said.

"I think my mom would've been okay with that. My dad thinks I'm hilarious."

"Well, we know which side you get it from," Beverly answered, glancing over at Mike who swirling around the coffee in his mug—red faced, even still. "What about you, Mike? Any fun high school stories?" She asked, sad when simply saying his name made the boy's eyes go wide in terror. The coffee in his cup splashed over the rim and spilled down the side of his mug, almost dripping to the floor before he wiped it with his fingers.

"Um... Not... Not really. Nothing like that." He looked toward Richie who was now looking at him sadly—something unspoken going on between them. "I'm not like that."

"Too busy hittin' the books to hit it and quit it, am I right?" Richie asked, offering a small smile.

"Right," Mike mumbled, dissolving into Richie's side again as the conversation shifted to who was going to go downstairs and make sure Mike Hanlon was still alive after his night of drinking. Richie was hugging him before too long, resting his chin on the top of Mike's head while Mike hid his face in his neck.

Soon, Beverly thought. One day very soon, Mike wasn't going to be able to pull himself away from Richie long enough to let him go out with the Losers on his own. Seeing them out in public together would certainly be different than when they were alone... Honestly, she wondered if it would get Richie more excitable or if it would calm him down since bored tabloid photographers might steal a shot or two of them together. Now wasn't the time to have his image splashed across the headlines locking lips with a teenager. Eventually, it would happen—but hopefully not soon. For now, Beverly wanted to watch them and see their affections grow—see what it turned into, whether something beautiful and caring or dependent and sick.

Of course, she hoped for the former.

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Today, while Richie was gone, Mike dared to be a little more adventurous. He explored more rooms in the condo—even wandering around the guest room Beverly and Ben were occupying, just to get a feel for the space. On the same floor as Richie’s bedroom, there was the guest room, a full bathroom that was covered in Beverly’s cosmetics and perfume bottles, and an office.

The office itself wasn’t of much interest as it was small, a little cramped, and had out-of-place lace curtains over the window that Mike felt were left by someone else—some former tenant or maybe an ex-girlfriend perhaps. The large wooden desk where Richie worked faced the window and had on it a closed laptop, a leather-bound notebook, and a neat row of high-quality steel pens. It looked almost like a prop for a movie, and Mike might’ve even assumed it was set up just for photo-ops or something if not for the three fidget spinners, slinky, yo-yo, and glob of silly putty stuffed into the upper left corner. Richie always needed to be doing something with his hands, Mike had noticed, and it made him smile to think of Richie slaving away, trying to come up with new jokes, while fondling a slinky—or ending up teaching himself new yo-yo tricks for an hour instead of working.

In the office was also a bookcase which held rows and rows of little awards, trophies, and plaques. There were framed certificates sitting against the backs of the shelves, all showing Richie’s name with “Best in...” or “First Place in...” or “Most...” heading the top in embossed script. Also on the shelf was a porcelain mug that said “#1 Son” on it and Mike thought that was cute. He wondered if Richie’s parents knew the cup had ended up on the trophy shelf instead of the cupboard, then wondered if they’d think it funny.

There was a photo of Richie with both his parents on the wall opposite the bookcase, tucked in among other photographs of Richie with celebrities and his friends. Apparently he’d met the former president and got a photo shaking his hand—which was absolutely amazing. But the photo of him with his parents was by far Mike’s favorite. They were all dressed well, probably at an awards show or maybe even some red carpet event—or whatever the equivalent comedians had. Richie’s smile was exactly like his father’s, and they had the same super-thick glasses. His mother looked a bit tired—in

the way fed-up mothers tended to look—and Mike thought she'd probably heard one too many of Richie's bad jokes just before the photo was snapped.

Some of the pictures were from Richie when he was younger, his hair a little thicker and his eyes a little more vibrant. One of him sitting in a plush chair beside a late night host's desk was what Mike's second favorite of all the pictures. Sitting wasn't exactly the word for how Richie had arranged himself in the seat. He looked like he was about to lunge onto the desk and the host was laughing, looking very much like he was egging Richie on. Mike wondered if the still was taken during an off-camera moment or if there was a clip he could find somewhere online.

To think, he could learn more about Richie simply by looking him up *online*.

That realization alone sparked a two hour window in which Mike sat at Richie's desk, scrolling through interviews and photos and videos on YouTube. He finally saw the show Richie had been talking about before, the show he thought Mike recognized him from, and watched a good three episodes before moving on to more pictures.

The interviews he avoided a bit, feeling awkward listening to Richie talk when he wasn't actually in the room. It seemed strange to hear him share details about his life through web videos—impersonal was, perhaps, the right word—as opposed to hearing Richie speak about it himself. So, Mike settled happily into scrolling through hundreds and hundreds of photos—paparazzi photos, fan photos, professional head shots. Anything and everything he could find.

He felt the smallest bit like a schoolgirl with a crush, but ignored it. Richie was a celebrity, he told himself; he should at least know why.

It was during his endless scrolling that the messages from Richie started popping up at the top of his screen—pictures taken at the beach, little “wish you were here” messages that made it sound like he'd gone overseas on sabbatical or something.

Mike sent him a screenshot of the photos he'd looked up and earned the monkey covering its eyes emoji and a heart.

“Any goodies for the spank bank?” He asked, sending a chain of LOLs after it that extended into two separate messages.

“Maybe.” And a shrug.

“Don’t get too carried away. Save some venom for later. Last night was fun!” This was immediately followed by three of the monkey covering its face emojis and then, “Note to self. Do not wear swim trunks when thinking about...venom. BRB going in the water.”

Mike laughed harder than he should have, leaning back in Richie’s office chair. He sent a message to Beverly, thanking her for the clothes he had yet to try on or even look at and asking how her trip to the beach was going.

She sent a photo of her polished toenails covered in sand .

“Feels good but you’d have to be crazy to go swimming! It’s so cold! PS Richie is crazy...”

Mike laughed even harder as a photo of Richie waist-deep in the frigid ocean water came through. It was pixelated and zoomed in so Beverly didn’t have to leave the safety of her beach umbrella and towel, but it was very clearly Richie—and he had his arms crossed over his chest from the cold. That crazy moron... Mike didn’t know how but he felt like every single obnoxious thing Richie did just made Mike love him more.

Wait... Love?

No. No, absolutely no.

Mike backed out of the messages, feeling his cheeks burning. He was getting carried away. He had barely known Richie a week. It’d only be a full week at, like, ten o’clock this evening. It wasn’t possible. He was just being his stupid, clingy self again. He was just being needy again. It wasn’t love. He had no idea what love even was except that it hurt.

Infatuation, maybe. Lust, perhaps. Not love. Mike couldn’t love, just like he couldn’t *be* loved. He was defective and broken and *needy*. His own parents didn’t love him—why would he dare to burden Richie

with his own poor excuse for love? His desperate neediness which masqueraded as “love”?

Mike left Richie’s office feeling ashamed of himself, and carried the tablet downstairs to the living room where he curled up on the couch. He needed to eat, but ended up staring at the tablet instead.

Holly was messaging him now, asking how he was and what it was like in LA. It was the first time she had reached out to him since he’d stormed out of his parents’ house for the final time, ignoring his mother’s pleas to “tell me what’s wrong!” Holly had always sided with their father—leaning more toward the “his house, his rules” side of things. Easy for her to say—she was the perfect one. Even so, she was his little sister, the only one he had, and it warmed him that she even still cared about him after all he’d done wrong.

They talked for about an hour, then Mike got up to heat up the burger he’d been given the night before. It tasted pretty good, minus the half-soggy, half-solidified bun compliments of the microwave, and he ended up finishing it with a fork and knife.

Around the time he was cleaning his plate, the group chat he had going with Lucas, Dustin, and Will started to become more active—the three of them trying to get him to respond when he was starting to feel himself becoming more and more drained.

They wanted him to join their DnD campaign. Will was going to be DM, but if this campaign went well, maybe Mike could do the next one. It sounded fun and he wanted to get excited for it, but he didn’t have any of the things he needed—he had none of his books, none of his figures or maps. All his notebooks had gotten lost a long time ago when he’d first moved in with Jordan. He tried to express this, tried to say he’d just hold them all back, but the three of them weren’t having it.

“Give me an address and I’ll send you some of mine!” Dustin argued.

“Yeah man. I’ll send you some miniatures. I’ll even paint some of them. You’ve gotta play!” Lucas was saying.

In a private message outside of the group chat, Will asked him if his

new “friend” was the reason he was saying no to all of them.

“Is he not going to let you play either?”

“He will. I just don’t think I can. It’s too soon. You know?”

“We can wait for you. It’s fine. We want you to play. It’s not the same with outsiders.” Outsiders being the players they had found online who joined in their campaigns.

“Yeah but I was banished from the party. Remember? You guys don’t need a traitor in your midst.” He meant it to sound more playful than it had, and didn’t realize he was actually as upset about the whole situation as he was now that Jordan was out of the picture. He could feel things besides tension and fear, and he wasn’t so sure if was a good thing.

He wanted Richie to come home. At least then he’d have a distraction. Maybe he’d get stung by a jellyfish and cut their day at the beach short. Maybe he’d come home and Mike could take care of him and forget that his entire life had been ripped out of his hands without him putting up a fight.

“As far as we’re concerned, you were charmed by Aboleth. Or a vampire. Not sure which until we see the effects up close. Just glad it wasn’t the Mind Flayer.”

“Mind Flayer might’ve been better.”

They talked for a while outside of the group chat, Mike ignoring Dustin and Lucas for as long as he could. They were goading him for an address and that wasn’t something he felt comfortable giving out or even asking Richie to provide.

“We can make it a short campaign just to get you back in the swing of things. It’d be really fun to have you back,” Will pressed, on and on—over and over. “We really missed you. I hope your ‘friend’ lets you talk to us more.”

“He will. He does! He’s not like Jordan. I think he actually likes me.”

“I would HOPE SO.....”

Mike sent him a sweat drop emoji, not sure what else he could really say. Part of him was already starting to have doubts, even after what Richie had done for him last night. What if he just felt obligated? What if he just thought he had to or that he was supposed to? What if he'd been thinking of somebody else?

Someone like Eddie... Someone who actually knew him and could have loved him the way he deserved.

"Promise this one doesn't hit?" Will asked. Mike stared at the message a long time before typing out his reply.

"Not yet." He would. Eventually, Mike would be too much for him and he would. Mike had to remind himself of this. He wasn't a good house guest. He was always underfoot, always in the way. Richie would lose patience and he would strike. It'd happen. It *would* happen. It'd just take time...

Mike's only hope was that it would begin and end with hitting. Maybe just slaps across the face or to the back of his head. He hoped Richie would never take to hitting him with a broomstick or his belt or a fist. He hoped Richie would never take him by force just to shut him up. It would hurt so much worse coming from him... To have someone so happy and cheerful turn to anger and hate because Mike was too clingy for his own good would shatter the remaining pieces of his heart.

"Maybe you are with the Mind Flayer...." Will said. Mike read the message and didn't answer.

He wanted Richie... He wanted to love Richie and be loved by him, but that was impossible. Love was something other people got to have, not him. Love was something for *other* people. It wasn't for him... He didn't deserve it and he wouldn't know what to do with it anyway.

Mike set the tablet aside and finished cleaning up the mess he'd made in the kitchen—and then waited six more hours for Richie to come home.

Notes for the Chapter:

More to come soon! I hope you are still enjoying the bumpy ride--healing is not a linear process!

13. Chapter 13

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys for the well-wishes regarding my parents' dog. I'm afraid she has since passed away. I got her to the vet and he gave her some medication, then she went out and has not come home. (They live in the country so the dogs have free run of the property.) Since it is so cold, I don't think she'll be coming back. My writing might slow down a bit now since the other dogs are very upset and have not let me sleep or eat or do much else. I cannot sit in a chair without a 70lb boyo slapping me in the face with his paws.

That's enough depressing peeks behind the curtain--here is a chapter of fluff with a splash of angst, but mostly fluff!

Richie was over the moon. Absolutely, one hundred-percent, undeniably over the moon happy. Mike had gone out with him and the others today. He'd gone with them to Little Tokyo and the pier, to a Dave & Busters for dinner and drinks, and then finished off the night at the planetarium—just the two of them because the rest of his friends were losers who wanted to go see a movie. (Or so Richie had told Mike.)

It had been Ben's idea to go to Little Tokyo in the morning, wanting to try out a sushi place he'd read about online. It charged by the plate—and the plates traveled around the restaurant on a conveyor belt which snaked along the tables. Mike, who had never had sushi and had definitely never had sushi delivered to him on a conveyor belt, had quickly forgotten to be anxious and got caught up in the fanfare right away. Being seated as far as humanely possibly from Bill probably helped. Richie and Mike were sat with Ben and Beverly while Mike Hanlon and Bill were at a different table across the restaurant. The place had a line to get in, but the wait wasn't as bad as they'd thought it might be. Even so, they didn't have room for a table of six.

That suited Richie just fine. It let Mike relax and got him more accustomed to Ben—something that needed to happen because Richie couldn't stand the way Ben's voice made the boy flinch for the first half of their meal.

After conveyor belt sushi, they explored the shops and sites nearby, moseying around construction that blocked off sidewalks. Beverly found a high-quality picture booth—what Richie thought of as an Instagram on the Street sort of deal—and insisted they all take pictures together. She dragged Ben in first, made him play the part of the perfectly photogenic boyfriend while he pretended the gesture didn't have him tickled pink. Then she sunk her claws into Mike who was less than eager to have his photo taken with his cheek still scabbed up.

Somehow, though, she convinced him to take pictures with her—five dollars apiece—and then all of them together as a group. Even with the six of them inside the photo booth, it felt like there was room for six more. It was entirely too spacious and too weird, but Richie went along with it because Mike was seeming to be feeding off Beverly's energy and enjoying himself.

“Can you print an extra copy of that one, Bev?” Mike Hanlon asked after they'd taken the last (and best) of their group shot (this one excluding Mike because “Original Losers Only” was Bill's idea of the perfect photo). “This reminds me of that last summer together. Do you remember? We all crammed in to the photo booth at the movie theater? I'd like to add it to my scrapbook. This one, too,” he said flashing his copy of their group photo (the one including Mike) to the boy who smiled at him nervously. To Richie, it seemed as if everyone were silently trying to say it'd be nice to have a photo without Mike in it in case he didn't make the cut... Richie didn't like it, but he kept his mouth shut and let the photoshoot end with Beverly shoving him and Mike into the booth alone and sliding the white curtain aside to hide them.

“Keep your pants on! There's cameras in there!” Beverly called.

“Yeah, no shit!” Richie called back, rolling his eyes while chuckling regardless.

Mike was in good spirits, showing Richie all the different filters they could choose, not mentioning his cut cheek until it came time to actually take a series of shots. He kept trying to turn his face to hide it, and Richie let him for a picture or two, then he took out his car key and pretended to use it to scratch the cut into his cheek while Mike glowered at him—captured permanently on film. It was Richie's favorite photo of the day. It captured his and Mike's dynamic perfectly, he thought. He played the annoying partner and Mike pretended he hated it when his eyes showed how much he actually liked the attention. Yeah, Richie had his boy figured out.

After pictures, they ended up in tourist-trap gift shops where Beverly bought stationary and an over-priced t-shirt. Bill got a few knickknacks for his wife and Mike Hanlon bought a cute stuffed animal for his girlfriend's teenage daughter after sending her a dozen photos until she picked the one she wanted.

Mike picked up a few things here and there, but whenever he caught Richie looking would set them down with a shrug and walk away. It was obvious he was uncomfortable with Richie buying him things—with anyone buying him things—but Richie was determined to find him something. Clothes were a bust since nothing in this shop had a high enough collar to hide the cigarette burns on Mike's neck left over from that creep. Action figures seemed...childish, and not in the quirky way. In the end, Richie bought a stuffed cat/body pillow that was about as tall as Mike—because the boy wouldn't pick anything for himself and it was the most obnoxious thing he could find in the store.

(Later, when a picture of him carrying said giant cat body pillow cropped up in the media, Richie would have to think of a better joke than 'It's the only pussy I'll be grabbing for a while.' Mike hadn't even needed to pretend he didn't find that one funny. He just stared at him, puzzled and annoyed, while Beverly muttered a small 'Beep-Beep, Richie,' like it was the first time she'd heard a dirty joke come out of his mouth.)

The cat pillow got fastened into the middle seat in the back, between Beverly and Ben, as they drove to the pier. Mike Hanlon and Bill shared Ubers to get there since the Mustang couldn't fit six people—let alone six people and a human-sized cat.

The pier, as far as Richie was concerned, was boring. Too many people, too many tourists, and they'd just spent all day yesterday at the beach regardless. There were carnival games and vendors selling food—some of which caught Mike's attention which Richie was happy to indulge—but it felt more like a way to kill time before it became socially acceptable to start drinking.

They did see dolphins though, and that got Mike back in a good mood. He would shift between being happy and distracted and then sad and quiet constantly, and it was hard for Richie to keep up. If he seemed too low, Richie would look to Beverly who would just give him this reassuring nod that seemed to say, "He's alright. Just let him feel what he's feeling." It was hard, because whenever Mike looked upset, the first thing Richie wanted to do was crack jokes and try to cheer him up. He didn't care that nine out of ten of them fell flat—at least he'd made an effort. It was hard to watch the kid start to spiral downwards and not try to fix it.

That being said, dolphins cheered him up. Weird desert from a street vendor cheered him up, and so did Richie letting him "steal" sips from "his" cocktail at the Dave & Busters they went to. He'd ordered it for Mike, everyone knew he'd ordered it for Mike, but if they got carded he had to at least make it look like it hadn't been his plan, right?

They played games together, ate chicken wings like they had the night they met at the comedy club bar, and actually got to talk for a while in private while rest of the Losers were playing games elsewhere.

"I watched some of your show," Mike told him, smiling after finishing off the last of the cocktail.

"Oh, yeah? And you didn't run toward the nearest exit?"

"It was okay," Mike said, biting his lip to hide how much he was smiling.

"Just okay!?" Richie asked, feigning hurt. "I worked hard on that!"

"I like your stand-up better."

“Really? I thought you liked my going down better.” It was a stretch and it failed, and Mike rolled his eyes at him but Richie didn’t care.

“I snuck into your office,” Mike said, looking down at the greasy table where they were sitting as if he’d confessed some great crime.

“Get any writing done for me? I’m supposed to call in to a pitch meeting tomorrow to start throwing around ideas for next week’s segments. I don’t have shit,” Richie said, making sure Mike met his gaze so he could see that Richie wasn’t angry at him or blaming him for his own inability to come up with material. He seldom if ever came up with ideas the team thought were good—that’s what the writers were for. Richie had the look that the network wanted and a personality that drew in the fans—the rest he could be spoon-fed and turn into a success. It didn’t make it easy, but at least he wasn’t left to fall flat when his mind couldn’t come up with “marketable” ideas. That had to at least count for something, right?

“You could tell them about me. I’m a pretty big joke,” Mike said, chuckling awkwardly while his finger traced a line of perspiration down the cocktail glass.

“I do need to call my manager about that,” Richie admitted. “We’ll be seen together. People will ask questions. Not... Not right away, probably. I’m not Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt. But people will notice and they’ll ask and it’s better to have a statement ready than to let the media go rabid while we’re still working out the PR.”

“Do you have to do that with all your girlfriends?” Mike asked, looking at his empty glass.

“No... I suppose not. But most of them were normal girls from LA that look like every other girl in LA. Not much to talk about there. Like I said, I’m not Tom Cruise or anything—but if they see Trashmouth out kissing some hot teenage boy, they’re going to wonder what’s up. Better to be ready than to let them come to their own conclusions... I don’t know. I just don’t want you to get hurt. I won’t tell my manager if you don’t want me to. I won’t tell anybody if that’s what you want. I just don’t want you to get hurt because of me.”

“Why would I get hurt?” He asked, so much innocence in his voice and in his eyes—like he really hadn’t seen the way the media tore people down for getting too close to celebrities the fans deemed too good for them. Maybe he hadn’t—maybe his head was that far in the sand or he was just optimistic that the court of public opinion wouldn’t tear him apart with the label of Gold Digger or worse.

“Well, for starters, no one knows I’m gay,” Richie offered, wishing he had a drink to hide behind. “So that’s going to be a shock. All my exes coming out of the woodwork to say they knew it all along and air all my dirty laundry for the whole fucking world to see. Then it’ll be weird rape accusations from people I’ve never met or guys I hooked up with on the road. Those are always *fun*. And then...then they’ll turn on you. Then they’ll want to know everything about you—and they’ll chase you and harass your family and it’s...yeah. Yeah, it’s pretty fucking painful.”

“Oh...” And then Mike was quiet for a long time, staring at the empty glass in front him so long Richie almost asked if he wanted another even though that was a bad idea. “You don’t have to tell anyone, or— or be seen with me at all. You don’t... Richie, I really like you. I don’t want your life to get messed up because of me. If it’d be better for me to just disappear—”

“I don’t *want* you to disappear. You’re not some dirty little secret—don’t think that’s what I want. It’s not. You’re not... It’s not—Fuck! I really fucking like you, too, okay? The shit we went through—the Deadlights the Demagargoyle, who else am I going to talk to about that? Who else can I be open with about that? Besides Beverly and Ben and those guys? No one. No one but you. I feel like... I don’t know, maybe I am crazy—maybe Bill’s right and I’m out of my mind because I’ve been on my own too long or whatever—but things happen for a reason right? Maybe we were brought together for a reason. I don’t want the shitty fucking paparazzi to tear it all apart. I *like* you. I want to be with you—I *want* seen with you.” He realized then that he was getting winded and that Mike was staring at him, that he’d gotten himself all worked up again and was acting like an idiot—like a junkie swearing he could quit anytime he wanted. “But I don’t want it if it’ll just hurt you. I don’t... I don’t want you to—to do anything crazy or—” or end up like Stan “—or I don’t know... I don’t

want anything bad to happen. I want you to be safe with me—to *feel safe* with me.”

How could he, though, Richie had thought, with him acting like a raving lunatic in the middle of a Dave & Busters? People were moving around them, talking and laughing—games chirping and whirring and playing music. And there he was, panicking because he didn’t know how to say, “I’d rather lose everything than lose you.”

And he would. He’d give it up—the pitch meetings, the late night segments, the Netflix special, the months out on the road doing stand-up. He’d take it all, wad it into a ball, and chuck it out the window if that was what it cost to have Mike with him. To have Mike close, keeping him warm—keeping *him* safe.

“Wow...” Was all Mike said for the longest time, pulling his hands from atop the table down into his lap. “All your exes must’ve been really bad in bed. You know...if a week with me has you talking like this.”

It took Richie a moment to realize that it was a joke...and for that joke to then process. And by the time it did, he could only manage the smallest of laughs before embarrassment had him putting his forehead down on the greasy table. Had it really only been a week? It felt so much longer than that. A week ago, he’d been swallowing down bottles and bottles of liquor and beer before the afternoon even hit—trying not to feel anything. A week ago, he’d been sitting in a bar, pissed off and pissed drunk, picking up a stranger he’d met by trying to pick a fight.

“Richie, I have to use the bathroom. Will you wait for me here?” Mike asked, getting Richie to lift his head off the table.

“Nah, I think I’m gonna head out. You can hitchhike. Perfectly safe. Just be careful you don’t flash any gang signs.” He did something weird with his hand, a mixture of sticking out his thumb like a hitchhiker and flipping someone the bird—but Mike was already rolling his eyes and walking away.

Richie brought his phone out of his pocket, seeking a distraction from his thoughts before he could be left alone with them for too long, but

no sooner did he get it into his palm did Ben was sit down across from him at the table.

“Whoa. Hey there, Haystack. Long time no see.”

“Yeah, Beverly’s getting more points put on our card. You and Mike haven’t been playing.”

“He’s just in the bathroom,” Richie said, his eyes flickering between Ben’s and the beer bottle in his hand. A drink sounded good right about now, but he had to drive.

“Looked like you two were getting a little heated,” Ben said, taking a quick sip of beer and looking anywhere but at Richie’s face.

“Bev tell you to say that?”

“Nah... Bill.”

“Bill? That’s a fucking twist.” Bill needed to mind his own business, and Richie was sure if he got home and drank enough, he’d get the nerve to actually say it.

“Is everything okay?” Ben asked. “I’m not going to go reporting to Bill. I’m just asking. As a friend. Man to man. Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? I got to see your sexy bod in swim trunks yesterday.”

“I’m being serious.” And man did his voice have a way of cutting Richie deep—making him feel guilty for things he didn’t even do wrong.

“Serious? Why so serious?” He asked, putting on his best Joker impression and not missing the way it made Ben’s jaw tense. “What? Wrong clown?”

“Richie...”

“What? What is everybody so goddamned worried about? You think he’s gonna stick a knife in my neck while I’m asleep? Go on a killing spree down Cielo Drive?”

"No. I'm worried you're going to do something *stupid*. We all are. You've just got your head too far up your ass to notice."

"You mean up Mike's—"

"Stop it."

"Look, what do you want from me, man?" Richie asked, trying not to bristle at him. "I've been in a good mood *all day*."

"Yeah, and I get that. We all see it. It's Mike. You're just happy to be with Mike—"

"And you're with *Bev*. And you're just happy to be with *Bev*. What's the matter with that? Why is everyone so pissed off that I actually found somebody?"

"I'm not—we're not pissed off you found somebody! I think it's *great*. Beverly thinks it's great. Mike—Big Mike—he thinks it's great."

"So then what's the problem!?"

"There *isn't* one! Jesus, Richie... All I wanted to ask was if you were okay—if you need anything, someone to talk to about this whole thing you've got going on."

"Mike isn't a thing," Richie snapped.

"Richie... C'mon, man. I'm not Bill, alright? I'm not trying to bust your balls. Mike's a good kid—he obviously likes you. I'm *happy* for you. It's not every day you meet someone who looks at you the way he does."

Richie was quiet a moment, wondering how many other people were going to notice the way Mike looked at him—or the way he couldn't help but stare at Mike. The kid was perfect, he was nice to look at, but it was something else entirely to drink his entire presence in—to just take a step back and watch him move through his world, through Richie's world. Even just today, he had moved with more and more confidence as the hours ticked by. Richie picked up on it because he couldn't help the way he watched him.

“You were kind of like that...with Beverly back in the day,” Richie said. “When she was busy locking lips with Big Bill.”

“Yeah? You must’ve been the only one. Took, what, three tries for her to figure it out? Three tries and almost thirty years?”

“I noticed—I mean... C’mon, dude. You kissed her and woke her up like fucking Sleeping Beauty or Snow White or something.” That had Ben laughing sheepishly as he took another swig from his bottle. “Was it love at first sight? You?—With her?”

“Eh... Yeah, kind of,” Ben said, shifting around in his seat. “She’s a beautiful woman—she always was. Love at first sight, though... maybe. Probably. I didn’t realize it was more than just a crush until she talked to me the first time—you know, outside of debates or something in Sosh class. Is that what happened to you? Saw your spitting image sitting in the audience at your show and thought, ‘Yes! That one!’?” Ben asked, laughing heartily. Richie found himself smiling to, if not more so at his memory of Mike at the bar.

“Kinda... Honestly, I was so drunk I don’t even remember taking him to bed. I have no memory of us leaving the bar, I don’t remember taking my clothes off or ordering room service—four hundred bucks, by the way! They charged me four hundred bucks for a bottle of whiskey and some wine.”

“Ouch! And you were already impaired!”

“I know! I didn’t need more... But, yeah... No, first thing I did when I saw him was try to pick a fight. I felt these eyes on me, you know? Like how you just *feel* it, like someone’s looking at you. So I snapped at him and, shit, it sounded like I kicked a puppy. This tiny little voice, you know? Then I look up and I see *me*. Me from thirty years ago, staring at me like I just fucking shot him. I’m not kidding, I thought it was the fucking clown. I kept snapping at that poor kid. Ben, if you’d been there, you probably would’ve fucking punched me. I was so rude.”

“And... And then you took him to bed? You don’t even remember that part?” Richie shook his head. “Do you even remember *why*?” Ben asked, looking more and more put off by what was marketed as a

love story.

“He was *cute*. I figured out he wasn’t the clown and got him talking... I shared some food with him and... I-I guess—Shit, maybe that was my Sosh class. I saw him, he was cute, I liked him—”

“Slept with your clone—”

“Slept with my clone, apparently,” Richie reiterated, cringing a little at himself. “But when I got up the next morning I... He doesn’t want me to talk about it, but...his whole body is just *covered* in bruises. Covered—head to toe. And he’s got alcohol poisoning and he’s sick and he’s apologizing to *me* for some reason like I’m not the reason he’s sick in the first place. He was just so *helpless* and I felt bad for him. You’re supposed to give them your number and ask if they want to see you next time you come through town... Ben, I couldn’t leave him. I would’ve moved into that fucking hotel if it meant I got to keep seeing him. He has me... The very minute he told me he didn’t have a phone, that his boyfriend did all that shit to him, he had me... I don’t even think he knows how much he *has* me. If he’s not in the room, he’s all I think about.”

“So are you gonna...come out? To the public?” The thought made Richie cringe, made his hands twitch for a glass of alcohol. He didn’t want to think about that. Even more so, he didn’t want to live through that... But he owed it to Mike. If he wanted this, he had to be committed. He couldn’t keep him hidden.

In the back of his mind, that evil fucking clown was floating down from the sky singing at him about dirty little secrets...

“I might... That’s what we were talking about. He doesn’t see why it’s such a big deal—”

“Well, not to be a dick, but he’s eighteen, right?”

“Yeah.” Yeah, Richie understood it. He was eighteen—the world outside of his small hometown was still foreign to him. He’d learned a lot about the hardships of life under the roof of that psycho, under the roof of his parents who kicked him out, but it didn’t make him inherently good at handling the press. He might not think that having

a secret relationship with a celebrity was such a big deal, or even be able to imagine what getting found out could do to a man...

“Yeah, to him, he’s just happy to have you. I’ve seen the way he looks at you, alright? You say he has you, but you’ve got him too. He’ll do just about anything you want. And I’m not saying that to be gross—so whatever joke you’re about to say, just don’t. Alright? Mike’s going to do whatever you want. So if you need to let your people know what’s going on, then do it. Do what you need to do—honestly. Richie, do what *you* need to do. He’ll follow along with the rest.”

“I don’t want him to just passively *follow along*. Okay? He’s his own person!” The very thought disgusted him. Passively following along with what another person wanted was how Mike ended up in the hospital—beaten and bloody. That was how he ended up living with a psycho who beat the shit out of him. Doing what he was told like he had no other choice was why Mike shielded his face in fear of a blow when they were in bed together. Fuckers probably raped him... God, if Richie ever found out that fucker raped him...

“He doesn’t have a career in the public eye. Alright? He’s not the one who has to live down, what, two *decades* of frat boy comedy that half the time borders on homophobic. Especially your older stuff.”

Richie didn’t want to dig in to his history of more than borderline homophobic jokes that certainly hadn’t stood the test of time. To be honest, he didn’t want to be having this discussion at all—so he went for the obvious way out, not caring that his tone came out sounding more frantic than humored. In a way, he was starting to feel backed into a corner. Everyone—even his friends—had all the dirt on him, and he had no secrets of theirs to defend himself with.

“Wait... Haystack, are you saying you’re a *fan*?”

“Beverly watches your stuff sometimes. Don’t change the subject.”

“Alright—fine. Yeah,” Richie snapped, the tension getting to him—rippling under his skin. “So he doesn’t get it. I know he doesn’t get it. He’s got a lot on his fucking mind right now if you haven’t noticed. He’s been through some shit—”

“I’m not saying that’s a problem!”

“But I’m going to do what I have to to keep him happy.”

“And you really think he’s going to be *happy* if the network drops your show or some huge scandal breaks out? I mean—Shit, Richie! He *looks* like you. He looks *exactly* like you. If you two get *caught*, the shit’s gonna hit the fan. I don’t want to see that happen to you.”

“What—are you on the same boat as Bill? You want me to get a fucking paternity test? Is that what all of you want? You think I’m fucking my son?—Like I’m some kind of freak?”

“No one thinks that! Richie, c’mon... We’re just worried about you. I want you to be with Mike. I do! I want you to be happy—I just want you to be safe, too.”

Richie looked off in the direction of the bathroom, hoping to see Mike on his way back to the table only to see him talking to Beverly and Mike Hanlon over by the bar. He had to squint, but Mike seemed okay—seemed like he might be smiling around the rim of a large plastic cup of Coke.

Was he losing control of himself? Richie wondered. Things were moving so fast between himself and Mike, and Richie seldom gave himself time to think of much else. He’d never felt this way toward any of his exes—never had things move at such a quick pace or command so much of his attention without him feeling the slightest bit drained or resentful. He was preoccupied, worried about Mike’s needs, his wants... He didn’t *care* about his own. For once, he didn’t even care about his career. All he wanted was to see that bruised up, frightened boy he was so enamored with heal and smile—be happy, because of him.

Fuck, he hated to admit it, but Ben was right.

Richie had to be more careful or he’d lose himself completely. There was a world, a life, outside of Mike and that hotel room. He needed to keep that in mind before there *wasn’t*. And as great as that sounded, to have nothing else to think about or focus on than Mike and how fucking perfect he was and how perfect they were together,

it wasn't feasible. It wasn't that Richie was unused to being slaughtered by the court of public opinion, but it didn't make it enjoyable. And he didn't want to see Mike go through it either. He didn't want that cute little smile to turn back into tears.

Fuck, Richie really had it bad, didn't he?

"I'll talk to him," Richie said, looking back down at the table. "We'll work something out. He's a good kid. He'll understand—we just... Fuck, we need some time alone. The timing for all this fucking *sucks*. We never got to discuss anything before I got him here because we were on the train and he was fucked up on pain meds."

"Yeah," Ben said, laughing with very little humor before taking a mouthful of beer. With his lips still on the bottle, his eyebrows shot up as if he'd been struck with an idea and the bottle was set down with a loud clack, Ben's hand coming up to cover his mouth as he swallowed. "What about tonight?"

"What *about* tonight?"

"The planetarium! Mike—our Mike—he told me about it on Monday. They have specials at the planetarium on Wednesday nights. It's perfect. Take him to the planetarium! Have a night under the stars. He'll love it. You guys can actually go on a date. Have some time to talk."

"What? Tonight?" As tempting as it sounded, springing something on Mike like that felt like a bad idea. Or maybe he was just nervous and trying to talk himself out of it.

"Yeah!"

"Why? What are you guys going to do? How would you get back to my place?"

"We'll take an Uber. We'll go to a movie or something. You were sick the whole time you were with him the other day. Now's your chance—you can take him on a real date. None of us Losers holding you back."

"What, take him on a date and explain the ins and outs of show

business?”

“If it comes up,” Ben said, shrugging as Beverly and the others came over to their table—including Bill who was grinning the way he only did when he was drunk.

Richie’s mind was spinning, caught up in a mess of uncomfortable jokes and topics he didn’t want to discuss, as Mike came up to him—all shy smiles and with those big doe eyes Richie couldn’t handle.

“Hey,” Mike whispered, standing close to Richie’s chair, touching Richie’s shoulder. It was almost like Bev and Mike Hanlon had told him to go try and convince Richie to take him on a date—or to a Motel 6 beside the highway for a quickie. Honestly, at the moment, Richie could go either way.

“You got the good shit in there?” Richie asked, tapping the side of Mike’s plastic cup to distract himself from Mike’s fingers twisting around locks of his hair at the nape of his neck. Yeah, someone either bought the kid a shot or put him up to this.

“Just some Coke. Beverly says I’m not supposed to drink on my medication,” Mike said, smiling shyly before leaning down and pressing a fast kiss to the corner of Richie’s mouth. Richie barely even had a chance to turn into it, let alone get a chance to return it. Mike licked his lips as soon as he pulled away, then took another sip from his cup. Richie wanted so badly to grab him by his face and pull him in for a proper kiss—or an improper kiss, sloppy and dirty as fuck right here in front of everyone. Where did he get off licking his lips like that? Really? Didn’t he realize how perfect and tempting his mouth was?

Yeah, it would be nice to just...have him alone. See him out and about, alone together.

“You wanna go somewhere tonight?” Richie asked, letting himself get caught staring at Mike’s perfect mouth—those plump, perfect lips. He wanted to grab the bottom one between his teeth and see what sound he could get the boy to make.

Probably best to not do that in the middle of the Dave & Busters

though. Probably best to stop thinking about it all together unless he wanted to stay stuck at the table all night because standing up would call attention to his increasingly tight pants.

“Like... Like a hotel?” Mike whispered, looking at Beverly out of the corner of his eye. Oh yeah, this brat knew what he was doing. Richie was now hoping it was more so something he’d done that got Mike in the mood than something his friends said to put the idea in the kid’s head.

The Losers were all talking to each other, though, either unaware or pretending to be. None of them seemed particularly interested in whether or not Mike succeeded in his temptation.

“If you know one that’s got a vacancy,” Richie said softly, smirking as Mike started to blush behind the layers of makeup, that little smile back on his lips. “I’d love to, uh, fill it for you.” Richie delighted in the way Mike chuckled and hid behind his Coke.

“You... You’re really doing this right now?” Mike asked him, like he wasn’t playing the part of a temptress, blushing under all that makeup hiding the bruises scattered across his perfect face.

How could Jordan have done it? How could he beat him, how could he burn him, when Mike was so much more beautiful like this? His little smiles were damn near intoxicating. His laugh was as potent as a rail of cocaine, and Richie knew the similarities well enough to compare. Everything about Mike was, to Richie, so attractive and so fucking perfect. Why did Jordan need to ruin it?

Richie had heard him cry and scream from fear and terror. He’d heard him desperate and hurting. He saw that bastard holding a broomstick over him, licking his lips in pleasure as Mike wailed over his shattered hand... How could Jordan have beaten him for pleasure?

Those noises of pain couldn’t even begin to compare to the little gasps and whimpers of pleasure he made in bed. They didn’t compare to how absolutely remarkable he was when he lost himself in that orgasmic haze.

"I guess we could do something else," Richie said, tearing himself out of his own thoughts before he fell in much deeper. "Planetarium?"

"What? Really? You have one?" Mike asked, his eyes lighting up.

How the fuck could someone want to beat him up when he was far more attractive when his eyes sparkled in joy? It took all that was left of Richie's willpower not to grab the back of his neck and pull him into a kiss.

A Motel 6 was sounding better than the planetarium. Fuck...

"Well, it doesn't have my name on the sign, but I could probably buy it if you asked me to," Richie said, smirking as Mike rolled his eyes. "Do you wanna go?"

"Tonight?"

"Yeah." Richie shrugged and played it cool—which probably meant he was obvious as fuck as he smirked at Mike.

"What... What about everybody else?"

Richie played it cool, or as cool as he could given the fact that he couldn't quit staring at Mike's lips and his eyes, paying equal attention to both—the physical aspect he loved the most, and those big windows into the soul he was getting so helplessly attached to.

He stared at them, into them, and felt Mike staring back—all night.

Mike looked *so good* in the passenger seat of his car. His black hair so glossy in all the lights from the street. His eyes shined so much, so beautiful—fuck, so lovely. Even sitting in traffic he was gorgeous. Richie didn't even mind the slow downs and accidents—the endless waits at construction sites. As long as he could spend the time he didn't need to watch the road staring at Mike, he was fine.

When they got to the planetarium, there was still an hour to burn before the next wave of lectures and walk-throughs. It was an hour he got to spend in the dark, in his car, kissing another boy like he was back in his drunken college days—only so much more satisfying. He wasn't ashamed this time. He didn't feel like he needed to keep a

lookout. He didn't have to make up excuses in the back of his mind the whole time for why he couldn't see the boy again after tonight. No, tonight he just got to be himself—and Mike could be himself. Richie got to kiss that perfect mouth until their lips started bruising.

Mike pawed at his thighs over the center console, grabbed at his shoulders and pulled him into desperate, needy hugs while their mouths worked together. Richie got to run his fingers through those thick, black curls—he got kiss those perfect lips until they were even more puffy and swollen.

He felt every bit like a high schooler again, and may have broken their kiss a few too many times to screech out off-key lyrics to *Paradise by the Dashboard Lights*.

"If you do that stupid baseball analogy bit I'm going to punch you in the dick," Mike had hissed at him—proving his knowledge of the song, proving once again that he was fucking perfect. Richie could've dragged him into the backseat and screwed him then and there if they were able.

He kind of found himself wishing Mike were a girl—just so he could take him in the backseat and screw him without having to worry about all the prep and bottles of lube. It was selfish, yeah, but *God*, he wanted him bad. He wanted him so bad.

Yeah, Richie was losing himself—and he didn't fucking care. Maybe he was better off lost. Maybe his old self wasn't worth hanging onto. His old self would be clutching onto a bottle of beer right now, or liquor more likely, with just as much desperation. His old self would be dying of alcoholism alone in his condo.

Fuck the fame and the fortune—he'd rather have Mike.

He'd give it up, he thought for a moment. He'd give up the shows and the fame and the condo—shit, even the car—if it meant an eternity kissing Mike's perfect mouth.

He kept his cool, though. He didn't drag Mike into the backseat like he wanted, didn't hurt him or let Mike push himself to go further. He kissed him, then dabbed the spit off the corner of Mike's mouth with

the sleeve of his shirt before fixing his hair—cleaning him up—and taking him inside.

When they were in the dark, looking through the telescopes in the darkness with all the strangers, Richie held his hand. They walked around holding hands, and if anyone passed them sideways glances, neither of them noticed.

Mike was smiling and laughing, babbling on and on about planets and solar systems—planets where it rained diamonds, planets where humans might be able to survive. Theories about aliens, theories about intergalactic travel. It was just like the bar when they met—Mike had happily rambled then too, only liquored up. Tonight, he was just himself. He was open and excited. He wasn't holding back. He was even laughing at Richie's whispered jokes and hushed impersonations of aliens and the people around them.

They had a stranger take a photo of them together by one of the telescopes on Richie's phone. Richie had his arm around Mike while the boy hid his cut cheek in Richie's shoulder, making his face as flawless as it should be—as it should always have been. Mike made him send it to him on Facebook so he could have it on the tablet later, and Richie was honestly close to making the photo his cell phone's background.

Yeah, this kid had him by the balls.

"I don't want to take you home," Richie said, walking slowly back toward the car. Mike's hand was still entwined in his own, swinging it back and forth between their bodies as they shuffled across the parking lot.

"We could get a hotel," Mike said, only half-jokingly. He wanted it bad, and Richie could not get over how hot it was to be wanted that much. In the back of his mind he was worried that, in time, he wouldn't be able to keep up. He was past forty and slowing down. Mike was eighteen and not even at his peak yet—already insatiable as it was. Was he actually going to be able to keep him satisfied? And if not, was Mike going to be good with that? "It could even be a cheap one. Not like the one you had at your show. I'd be okay with that."

“Baby, I wish—I *wish!*” Richie said, knowing that if Mike slipped a simple ‘please’ in there, he’d be jumping in the car and speeding toward the first hotel his GPS could find.

“Why don’t we?” Mike asked, bumping his head into Richie’s shoulder as the car grew nearer and nearer despite neither of them really wanting it to.

“I like having you in my own bed too much,” Richie said, kissing the top of Mike’s head before opening the car door for him. Mike laughed at him and stole a proper kiss, letting it linger before getting inside and pulling the door shut out of Richie’s hand. He was disappointed and Richie could tell.

When he got back into the car, he hesitated to put the key in the ignition. He didn’t want to put his hands on the steering wheel. He wanted to stay—the comedy club bar, the hotel room, and now the planetarium parking lot. He wanted to stay and exist in those brief moments forever.

“Hey,” he said, looking toward Mike who stared at him in that adoring way Richie didn’t now and never would deserve.

“S for horses,” Mike said back, smiling at him as he picked at the sleeves of the shirt Beverly had bought him.

Richie stared at him, letting Mike stare back until he shifted a little closer in his seat. He was over the moon that anyone could look at him that way, let alone someone he wanted just as bad.

“I really fuckin’ like you,” Richie said, feeling like that word wasn’t really enough. He already knew that, though. He’d known it when he said it the first time, out on the street in front of the comedy club.

I’m in fucking love with you.

Author's Note:

Thank you for reading! Please feel free to leave a comment and let me know what you think!

14. Chapter 14

Notes for the Chapter:

In a bizarre twist of fate for anyone keeping up with my dog drama, Sadie came home! I looked out the bedroom window yesterday morning and she was laying out in the yard. She's a little worse for wear since she didn't get to take any of her medication before disappearing for 48hrs, but she is back where she can be safe and warm! And her son the Cujo wannabe is no longer terrorizing me or destroying the house. And my family comes home today so I can get the hell out of this nightmare! So much for a writer's retreat in the woods.

I had to rewrite this chapter since I didn't like it much the first time and everything felt super rushed. Richie is actually a hard character to write when everything is filtered through the prism of humor for him--but you can't be happy all the time when you're terrified your whole life and the life of the person you're falling in love with are about to be ruined by the media. Richie just wants to be free and in love! Have some awkward flirting and fluff, and sad Richie. He's sad today.

If someone had told Mike a year ago—hell, even a month ago—that he'd be standing in a slowly rotating glass tram car, riding up the side of a mountain with a few celebrities and successful entrepreneurs, he would have rolled his eyes. And yet, by some twist of fate, that was where he found himself the day after his trip to the planetarium. They'd gotten home very late, passed out in each others arms in bed, and were woken up a little after eight in the morning by an overly energetic Beverly.

Palm Springs. They were taking a day trip to Palm Springs!

Mike had been so sleep drunk he almost threw back the covers to get up as soon as she'd shaken him awake. It took Richie grabbing him in

a bear hug and pulling him back down to the mattress for Mike to realize he was, one, completely naked, and two, so was Richie.

He turned red, Beverly covered her face and booked it out the door, and Richie whined because he was “cold” and didn’t want to get up.

Mike had half a minute to let it register that Beverly had probably seen the bruises and scars on his shoulders and chest, then was pulled into an all-too-steamy kiss he didn’t have time to get lost in. He wanted to—God, did he *want* to—but Beverly was knocking at the door a minute or two later reminding them to shower and hurry up.

He showered first so that Beverly could hide the bruises on his face—and the umpteenth hickey freshly chewed into his neck—while Richie took his.

Mike dressed in one of the outfits Beverly bought for him. The clothes weren’t his typical style, but the high-collared shirt hid his scars and the bruises Richie gave him. The sleeves were the perfect length to hide the marks on his wrist from Bill and partially covered his cast as well. If not for the scab on his cheek, he would almost look normal after Beverly’s careful application of makeup.

While his face was made-up, Mr. Hanlon, Ben, and Bill stood around the kitchen drinking coffee and talking about the day’s agenda.

They were taking a coastal train from Union Station to a stop in the middle of the desert where they had an Uber XL scheduled to take them into town. The train ride was a little over three hours and the whole time, some fan in the seat behind theirs was talking to Richie. Ben kept rolling his eyes and Beverly would shake her head while picking at her nails.

Despite the unwanted attention, Richie stayed in a good mood—only making fun of the fan once he was out of earshot at the odd little train stop in the desert. It was isolated, the stop, with nothing around for miles except dirt and the desert sky. It reminded Mike of a truck stop, but abandoned with only one road leading both in and out.

Their Uber took them into the city where they got lunch at a low-profile burger restaurant before taking yet another Uber out to the

mountains. Mike was feeling claustrophobic moving from train car to passenger van, to cramped restaurant booths to another passenger van. He tried not to let it show, though, and stared out the windows, drinking in the sites. Brown, rusty earth with mountains closing in on either side of the horizon. There were wind turbines up in the hills, then rows of beautiful houses with shiny cars parked out front. It was nothing like Hawkins—it was nothing like the Midwest at all.

The guide at the tramway warned them that it was cold on top of the mountain—a brisk seventy-three degrees—and tried to convince them to buy sweaters. Mike had laughed outright. Seventy-three was a perfect summer's day in the Midwest.

"I should've brought my parka. Snow boots, maybe," Richie said as they waited and waited and waited for their turn to get in the tram. It truly was remarkable, seeing the mountain from above. There were so many trees below his feet and all around him as they ascended higher and higher. "Is now a bad time to say I'm not so good with heights?" Richie was asking, cringing out at the trees in between glances at Mike and Beverly.

"You'll be fine, Rich," Beverly said, patting his shoulder.

"Or, you know, the cable will snap and we'll plummet a few thousand feet to our deaths," Ben offered, smirking at Richie who really did blanch at the thought. Mike, feeling bad for him, stood a little closer. He wanted to hold his hand or touch him, but was afraid that any number of other people on the tram might recognize him. What if some fan with no more respect than the one who had talked to Richie for *three hours* on the train was secretly filming them? What if Mike got them caught?

So Mike had to settle for brushing shoulders with him, even as they exited the tram at the peak of the mountain. They hiked around the in the trees for a while, sometimes as a group, sometimes just the two of them.

"Are you gonna make fun of me if I say I'm cold?" Richie asked as they wandered down one of the dirt trails.

"You'd die in Hawkins in the winter," Mike said, smiling at him. He

looked out of his element here, surrounded by trees and shrubs. Richie belonged in the city, Mike thought. The glow of lights fed into his aura in a way that was oddly natural. Here, in the shadows of the leafy overhang, he seemed muted and dull.

Or maybe he was just still pale from his fear of heights.

“Probably. I hate the snow. I hate being cold.”

Mike bumped shoulders with him again, growing increasingly concerned when Richie’s tone didn’t become playful—when his skin started to look clammy.

“Are you okay?” Mike asked, wanting more than ever to hold his hand as they made their way around the different trees. The air had taken on a distinctly sweet smell, like warm candy. Mike wondered if it was upsetting Richie’s stomach.

“I’m just cold,” Richie said, crossing his arms over his chest. He did only have on a t-shirt with an unbuttoned, thin Hawaiian print shirt on over it. Mike wished he had a jacket he could give him, but felt that being cold had little to do with what was wrong.

“Yeah?”

“And I don’t fuckin’ like heights,” he added on when he noticed the way Mike was looking at him. They had come to a stop beside the trunk of a large, sweet-smelling tree. There was another cluster of people a few yards away, chatting happily to one another as they wandered around the interweaving trails.

“We could’ve stayed home,” Mike said, his mind rushing back to their rushed, awkward morning. Had he done something to make Richie think he wanted to go? Well, he did *want* to go, but only because it was where Richie would be. He hoped Richie wasn’t putting himself through this for his sake, but feared that was exactly what was going on.

“No, I wanted to come. I want to hang out with the guys... With you,” he added on with small but bright smile.

Mike wanted to hold his hand. It *hurt* how much he wanted to hold

his hand when he knew that he couldn't. All around them were happy couples walking side-by-side, making their presence known. Ben and Beverly were holding hands while Beverly stood on tip-toe to peer over the edge of the cliff behind a low, wooden railing. They looked happy together—no one was giving them sideways glances or scoffing. It was so unfair he couldn't just do the same...

"Come here for a sec," Richie said, suddenly grabbing Mike by the wrist and pulling him around to the other side of the tree. It did little to hide them from sight, but for the moment they were away from that other small group of people.

The grip Richie had on him was firm, but warm. It didn't hurt. That was the first thing Mike noticed about it. Richie had grabbed him, pulled him, and didn't make it hurt. The hand that had been snug around his wrist loosened its grip and then trailed down to his hip as Richie leaned in to press a kiss onto his lips—one so unexpected that Mike almost froze up too much to kiss back. It was gentler than their normal kisses, tender in a way that Mike wasn't used to—especially from Richie who usually channeled nothing but over-eagerness and raw passion.

It was better than holding hands. It was better than any kiss Mike thought he'd ever had—because it was from Richie, because they were in plain sight of anyone who wanted to look, because Richie didn't have to be doing it and he was.

His heart ached from it—both warm and broken at the same moment.

Richie's soft kiss trailed to his cheek, then his temple, and then his lips were caressing the shell of Mike's ear. It sent shivers down his spine, and though he desperately wanted to do something—offer a hug or a kiss in return—all Mike could do was stand there and receive all that Richie gave him. He was afraid to touch him back. He was afraid he wasn't allowed, or that it'd be his movement caught on camera if someone were spying. He was terrified of being the reason they got caught. He was—

"I'd tell the whole world about you right now if I could," Richie whispered, as if he were reading Mike's mind. "Guess I could... I could go shout it from the mountain top. Now's the perfect time."

“Don’t,” Mike said, chuckling softly as Richie kissed his neck just below his ear, setting off another round of shivers.

“Too on the nose?” Richie asked.

“Jesus, Rich—trying to get to third base in front of the whole world?” Bill asked, appearing suddenly from around the other side of their tree.

“Just second,” Richie said, pulling back and leaving Mike to stand on his own. Now it was Mike who felt cold and he wanted little more than to grab Richie and pull him back against him. But not with Bill there—not with so many people around them that he was suddenly twice as aware of. “Why you gotta cock block?”

“Someone has to keep an eye on you. Don’t want you to end up in jail for indecent exposure,” Bill said, chuckling as he glanced from Richie to Mike and then walked away.

“Asshole,” Richie mumbled under his breath, chasing it with a small laugh of his own. “Fuck, I’m cold...”

“It’s not cold,” Mike said, daring to close the distance between them. PDA was a good way to ruin things, a good way to get shoved to the ground if he was with Jordan, but he couldn’t help himself. Richie had started it and Mike was hopelessly addicted to his touch.

“You’re just saying that because you Midwesterners have ice in your blood.”

“You’re from Maine!”

“Yeah, *from*. I’ve been in LA for the better part of a decade. You acclimate. All the ice in my veins melted *years* ago,” Richie said. He was hugging Mike back, and then pulled away just enough for them to start walking down the trail with his arm slung lazily over Mike’s shoulders.

It felt natural. It felt *comfortable*. And then Richie noticed another couple looking at them and his arm fell away, his hands going into the pockets of his jeans.

This was how it needed to be, Mike reminded himself, trying his best not to feel disheartened. This was just how things needed to be.

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Richie had been having a nightmare when Beverly woke him up that morning. He'd dreamt about Eddie and Stan, dreamt they were standing before him—rotting and bloody—demanding to know why they died and not him. In the dream, Eddie told him he hated him, that he resented him for living when he should've died in the cistern instead. In the dream, Richie had collapsed to his knees, apologizing—pleading with them for forgiveness. Pleading to Eddie specifically.

And then Beverly had been in his face and Mike was trying to throw their blankets off the bed and Richie had all of four seconds to remember where he was and why Beverly shouldn't be in his room at that moment.

She seemed to realize on her own that neither of them had a stitch of clothing on their bodies and she fled, leaving Richie to cling to Mike and try to forget the awful things he'd been seeing. He got in a few brief kisses before Beverly interrupted *again*.

He wanted to tell her to leave without them—he wanted to tell her today wasn't a good day, that he knew their stay was coming to an end and he was sorry but he *couldn't*. The nightmare had felt so real, and it stuck with him as Mike showered. It stuck with him through his shower.

It was with him on the train the whole time some fan gabbed at him about the stand-up career he wanted to start and tried to pick Richie's brain.

It was with him in the Uber and the aerial tram.

Eddie, spilling more and more blood the more he talked, screaming to know why he had to die when Richie was the one who deserved it.

Stan blaming him for the fear they all felt—asking why he'd never tried to stay in touch.

He didn't know. He couldn't remember. He didn't know why they lost

touch, they just *did* and he was sorry.

His mind continued its torture, even as Mike started to express his concern. The kid looked really good out in the sunlight. The patterns of shadows that the piney branches overhead cast across his face made him look like a painting. All Richie could think was that he should be taking photos of them together. He should be holding Mike's hand and trying to get him to pose on top of rocks or near the railing with a backdrop of trees and mountains. He *should* be. He *should* be more engaged.

But he kept getting sucked back into his nightmare.

And it wasn't fair to *Mike* who was getting worried.

Richie would do damned near anything to see that boy smile, but today it was such a struggle to even come up with a joke to get him to roll his eyes. He was having an off day again... That was two off days in the week his friends had come to visit, and third since he'd met Mike—since the anniversary of his friends' passing and the day he'd met Mike was definitely an off-day.

Then it had dawned on him that the anniversary of Eddie's death was now his anniversary with Mike. In fact, he probably wouldn't have met Mike if he hadn't been trying to drink himself stupid to get over Eddie.

Richie felt like such a fucking mess, and though he knew dwelling on it wasn't doing him any favors, he couldn't get his mind to stop. As soon as he started to feel the smallest bit better, his mind dug up images from his nightmare and sent him back down the pit. The only happiness he had was in his escape, his affections with Mike. The boy was worried about him and it was so clear on his face—in those big eyes.

Richie loved him. He loved how gentle he was when he needed to be and how absolutely savage he could be if Richie took a joke too far or stretched a topic too thin. He loved that there was fire underneath his trauma, a playfulness that went well with Richie's own. He loved him in all the ways that made his stomach twist into knots and his heart flutter—the ways that made him scared.

Ashamed.

He let his arm fall off of Mike's shoulders when an old white couple gave him a disapproving gaze—either because of their looks or their difference in age or the fact they were the same sex. He didn't even realize he'd done it until it was too late and Mike was stepping away from him with his head down. Richie wanted to grab him up again and plead with him, tell him, "It's not you. Please, it's not you," over and over until he understood.

All he could offer, though, were photos together—photos of just them, photos of just Mike, photos of both of them and the Losers.

Richie wished he were braver. He wished that old couple had looked at them wrong and he had grabbed Mike into the most passionate kiss of his life. Why hadn't he? No one was filming. No one up here seemed to know who he was or care if they did. Why was he such a big fucking coward? Why did *today* have to be an off day?

The thought nagged at him the rest of their time on the mountain. Once he was back on the aerial tram, however, he was back to being motion-sick and terrified that he was about to fall to his death. He really hated fucking heights...

Back on the ground, they were stuffed into another passenger van and being carted off to do shopping in the arts district—because that was what Beverly wanted. On those streets as opposed to in the mountains, Richie did feel the smallest bit more secure.

There were gay couples and pride flags all over the restaurants and bars. He forced himself to put an arm around Mike's shoulders and pull him into his side as they walked and Beverly shopped. He didn't miss the way it made the boy light up either. It made him so happy to be wanted and Richie hated himself for taking that feeling away for even a minute.

He and Mike managed to sneak off alone together to find coffee—which then turned into them eating together at an IHOP while the other Losers ate at some fancy place Bill had gone to once with his wife. Richie felt a little bad for ditching, but not as much as he would've if not for Beverly's friendly texting egging him on the entire

time.

“He’s making heart eyes at you. Go on a date!”

“None of us would blame you if you wanted to go off on your own!”

“Cheer up Richie! Take Mike somewhere fun!”

“You NEED a pick me up. Go get coffee.”

“We’re at a nice Italian place.... You’d hate it. Stay out with Mike!”

So he did, and their slow service and mediocre food was still better than some fancy Italian place with cloth napkins and stuffy waiters that would treat Richie like garbage—either because his clothes weren’t nice enough or because he didn’t behave like a stuffed shirt.

And, in the practically deserted IHOP, Richie got to put his hand over Mike’s on the table and hold it for a while. He hated that it made him nervous. He hated that he couldn’t just feel giddy like he used to when he’d get a particularly hot girlfriend and *wanted* the world to see. He didn’t want Mike hidden, but...

What if someone saw? What if it was reported? What if they were the next special on TMZ? What if all that happened and Mike couldn’t take it? What if he said he couldn’t handle the press and wanted out—wanted to leave?

Richie was having an off day and he was paranoid to the point of feeling sick. But he ate his food regardless and walked hand-in-hand with Mike down the picturesque street in the sunset. A couple of cocktails or a few shots of liquor and he wouldn’t even think twice about holding hands in public like this, Richie thought. Why couldn’t he just feel like that all the time?

“Ah, there’s our lovebirds,” Beverly said as Richie and Mike met up with her and the Losers by the coffee shop where they’d parted ways.

“Lovebirds? I was pimping him out up and down Main Street. What are you talking about?” Richie asked, surprised when Mike actually kicked him in the foot pretty hard for that one. “Sorry—yeah. We were at this nice little hotel. Rents by the hour.”

“Beep-Beep, Richie,” Beverly said, winking at him. She looked nice in the sunset, too, Richie thought as they all walked together. The moment seemed perfect, so why was he still not happy? Why was he still half-panicking over things that weren’t real—things that never happened and wouldn’t happen?

“The next train leaves at midnight. What do you guys want to do until then?” Ben asked, putting his arm around Beverly. Richie envied him. To be able to just stand in public and hold the person he loved without any fear, without any hesitation at all, was all Richie wanted. When people photographed Ben and Bev together, it was celebrated—beautiful fashion designer with beautiful architect, a match made in heaven. If they saw Mike and Richie together, the tabloids would never be so kind. Dirty old man and gold digger, was what they’d say. Pervert and grooming victim. Father and son incest still up for scrutiny...

It felt like his harshest critic was living in the back of his brain and Richie didn’t care for it one bit.

“Well, it’s almost nine-thirty now...” Bill said, looking at his phone. “I’d say we could hit the bars, but...” He looked at Mike, which made everyone turn to look at him as well. It made Mike visibly anxious and he shrank into Richie’s side. It was without hesitation that Richie put an arm around him and held him close and secure.

“I have a fake ID,” Mike mumbled, looking at Richie who shrugged and tried to smile. It made him uncomfortable, but he doubted any bouncer was going to be all that thorough if Mike was coming in with a pack of forty-somethings. As long as they didn’t act suspicious, no one should suspect a thing.

“I don’t think anyone would pay much attention,” Mike Hanlon said, looking around at the others who nodded. Bill and Beverly seemed like they had the most reservations, but even they shrugged it off in the end.

“As long as you don’t have too much,” Bev said to Mike, reaching out to pat his shoulder. “You’re still on medication for your hand.”

“I quit taking those days ago.”

“And the antibiotics?” Beverly pressed, smiling at him in an all too motherly way.

“Yeah, she got you there,” Richie said, kissing Mike’s temple. Mike put an arm around Richie’s waist and squeezed him once, briefly, and then pulled away—looking giddy. He understood, Richie thought. Mike really seemed to understand that it wasn’t Richie not wanting him them to touch, just that they couldn’t—not in public. At least not for long intervals. Not yet...

Soon, though. He needed to talk to his manager. He needed to talk to some reps at the studio. There was so much shit he still needed to take care of it and it pissed him off that he couldn’t treat Mike like he did all his ex-girlfriends. At least in the sense of dealing with the press. He could do everything short of screwing a woman in public and the media would barely bat an eye—the worst tabloid being Trashmouth Caught Locking Lips with Homewrecker, because he dated a girl after the media decided she’d broken up her last boyfriend’s marriage. Even then it was more about the girl...

Ah, shit... What if the media just went after Mike and not Richie? Richie at least could handle it. He was *used* to handling it. What if the press treated Mike like Bill had in the beginning? Like some con artist... Some junkie.

Richie couldn’t handle that. He didn’t *want* that for Mike. He just wanted the boy to be happy and safe—happy and safe *with him*.

But was that even possible?

Richie didn’t know... He honestly couldn’t say, and it scared the shit out of him.

He needed a drink—they needed to get to the bar. He really, really needed to drink this off.

“If they bust him on the card, I’ll go down for it. Let’s go. It’s fine,” Richie said, butting into the middle of a discussion Ben and Mike Hanlon were having.

It was decided. The Losers’ Club and their newest addition were

going to spend the rest of their night drinking.

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Mike liked this. He liked being out with Richie and his friends, even if Richie was a little more reserved than usual—at least before they got to the bar. He'd been off since this morning, but Mike chalked it up to being under the weather. Maybe he had another migraine that he didn't want to mention in fear it would spoil the fun. He seemed a little better now though, after getting a few drinks in his system, and was tormenting Beverly about some coat at her shop.

"C'mon! It's definitely subliminal! You were called to recreate the beaver!" Richie was laughing, his arm propped up on her shoulder while she, smiling, leaned away from him.

"I'm *burning* that coat!" She called, struggling to take a drink from her bottle of beer.

Ben and Mr. Hanlon were talking to each other on Beverly's other side, leaving the only uncomfortable thing about the evening being Bill sitting on Mike's right at the bar. It had been Mr. Hanlon in that seat before, but as soon as he'd gotten up to use the restroom, Bill had swooped in and taken it under the guise of getting the bartender's attention for another cocktail.

Seeing that Richie was distracted by Beverly, it wasn't long before Bill struck up a conversation with him. Mike had felt it coming, but it didn't make things any less uncomfortable.

"What did you and Rich end up getting into? I mean, besides working Main Street and renting motels by the hour?" Bill asked, smiling an almost genuine smile, though parts of it still seemed forced.

"Um... We went to IHOP. Guess breakfast's our thing," Mike answered, looking down at his beer. He had to make the Budweiser last. Richie told him it was the only one he was allowed to have since he was on medication. Annoying, but Mike guessed he understood.

"Yeah? Why's that?" His tone seemed friendly enough. Mike wondered if he somehow had managed to prove his honesty, his

loyalty to Richie, and Bill was genuinely trying to make amends.

Mike told him about breakfast the morning after they met and how they'd gotten breakfast before driving up to Chicago to catch the train to LA. Bill spent a little bit of time talking about his wife, Audra, an actress, and her love-hate relationship with brunch and mimosas. One meal, he said, shouldn't have to cost fifty bucks.

"So... Listen, I'm really sorry about what I did the other night. I know I've said it before and I know words don't mean anything without actions to back them up—"

"It's fine," Mike said, probably too quickly. "I know you were just worried about him." He glanced over at Richie then, just to make sure the man didn't realize they were talking about him. Whatever discussion he was having with Beverly still had his complete attention.

"That's no excuse to fuck up your arm," Bill said, taking a drink from his glass. "I just want you to know that I was wrong, that I know I was wrong now. You care a lot about that...idiot," Bill said, voice fading out as Richie literally almost fell off of his bar stool laughing at some joke he'd told Beverly. Mike turned around quickly to help support him, though Beverly was the one who got him righted on his seat again.

"My bad," Richie said, grinning at the bartender who rolled his eyes as soon as his back was turned. "Hi, Babe," he tacked on, seeming drunker than he really should be as he reached out to stroke Mike's chin with his thumb.

Between Bill trying to apologize to him and Richie trying to flirt with him, Mike really didn't know what to make of this situation.

"Hi," Mike said back, smiling for him and earning a kiss on the mouth he wasn't prepared for. It left him flushed and embarrassed, and checking the faces of the patrons around them as well as the bartender. Given the number of rainbow flags tucked into random corners around the bar, he wasn't in much danger, but it was a hard habit to break. One old man was watching them and almost looked jealous.

“Come here often?” Richie asked, regaining Mike’s attention.

“About as often as you,” Mike offered, earning himself a little smile from Richie before Beverly pulled him back into their previous discussion while simultaneously telling Richie to, ‘leave him alone.’

“Do you like California so far?” Bill asked, now that he had Mike’s attention to himself again.

“I guess so,” Mike answered, staring at his Budweiser bottle instead of the writer. “It’s... It’s warmer.”

“You’re from Indy, right?”

“Kind of,” Mike said, looking over at Richie who was ordering another drink.

“I just thought it wouldn’t hurt to get to know each other a little more. Any friend of Richie’s is a friend of the Losers, right?” Bill asked. He was offering that same, uncomfortable smile again. Whether or not he truly felt bad for bruising up Mike’s wrist while accusing him of being a con artist was still up for debate. Mike felt, if anything, he was sorry for hurting him—not because of what he’d said. Which was fair, he supposed. Richie was nice and sweet and affectionate, but he was also a bit of a mess. Mike couldn’t blame them all for being worried.

“I guess so,” Mike repeated, looking from Bill to his Budweiser. “I’m from Hawkins. It’s a little outside of Indianapolis.”

“Small town?”

Mike nodded and listened to Bill’s story about growing up in his own Small Town USA, Derry, Maine. A lot of racists, he said, a lot of bigoted people and bullies. In his stories, he sounded humble—in the stories Richie had told about their battles with It, he’d been their fearless leader. Compassionate, strong...

“But I’m sure you had friends back home,” Bill was saying, trying to coax Mike into opening up when all he really wanted was to go back to flirting with Richie and seeing if it could get him another beer despite Beverly’s motherly presence. Drinking would make this whole

thing a hell of a lot less uncomfortable for him.

In the end, Mike behaved and let himself talk to Bill about his friends back in Hawkins—how they'd met, how they'd spent hours playing DnD, how they lost Will but found him again (without mentioning the Demogorgon, because now wasn't the place or time), and how they'd banished him from the party because he was an idiot and chose a psychopath over them. (For the time being, also, he left out El.)

"We're better now though," Mike said, picking at the label on his bottle and forming a little pile of paper balls on the bar. "I think... It's easier with Richie 'cause he lets me talk to them and stuff."

"Your ex- didn't let you talk to anyone?" Bill asked, cringing as if he thought that was the worst thing Jordan had done to him—as if he didn't expect to hear that after seeing the damage that man had done to his face.

"No. Couldn't talk to anyone, couldn't look at anyone... I wasn't even allowed to see my family on Christmas. Not that they wanted me there, but... It's stupid. I was stupid."

"Hey," Bill said, his voice urgent but unnaturally kind as it was directed at him. Mike looked up at him from the pile of shredded paper. "You weren't dumb. Alright? That guy just had his hooks in you. It happens to the best of us."

"I guess so," Mike said, glancing over at Richie who was sucking down more bourbon and laughing with Bev and the others. He looked a lot better than he had on the mountain, but he always looked his best in the low light. It gave him a sort of dreamy quality—or maybe it just reminded Mike of where they met. Was it bad, too, that Mike liked him drunk? He liked the way it made him even more himself. With Jordan, booze always just made him angry and violent. Richie got drunk and all he wanted was to blurt out whatever went through his mind—and pull Mike into his bed.

"So...then how did you find Rich? With that guy not letting you go anywhere."

“He took me into the city to go shopping and got pissed off,” Mike said, the words coming easier this time—the third time he’d explained it out loud. “He doesn’t like to make a scene in public, but I knew he was mad because he put back all the things he’d just promised to buy me. New clothes and stuff ‘cause most of mine are bloody. Or—Or ripped, you know.” He was staring at his bottle again and digging harder at the label. Clumps of paper were building up under his thumb nails as he scraped them down the bottle. “I don’t really know what I did that pissed him off. He said that I was looking at somebody, but I probably didn’t do anything... He just wanted to be mad and... I didn’t want to get hit when we got home. He—He hit me so hard the night before. I think...” Mike looked over at Richie who was now hugging Ben, who then made eye contact with Mike long enough to roll his eyes and smile. “I think he beat me for, like, four hours straight the night before I met Richie. I was still really sore. He took me out to buy me things to make up for it, but then he got mad again. So I just ran.” Ran right into Richie who was suddenly hugging Mike instead of Ben in a grip so tight it hurt.

“Hey,” he slurred. Definitely way drunker than he should be.

“Hi,” Mike said, laughing while squirming in Richie’s arms—writhing under Bill’s disapproving gaze. “You’re crushing me.”

“No—No, no,” Richie was saying while simultaneously nuzzling his face into Mike’s hair. “Crushing you? No. Crushing *on* you. Yes—that one. Crushing *on*.”

“Richie, you’re *drunk*,” Beverly said. Mike couldn’t see her face, but he could practically hear the eye roll in her voice.

“Richie, c’mon, you’re smothering him, dude,” Bill said, grabbing Richie’s arm and pulling it until he released his death grip on Mike.

They managed to get Richie all the way off of him, and then Mr. Hanlon was helping him off to the bathroom. Mike gazed after him, wondering if he should’ve been the one to go—then realizing he probably didn’t have the strength to keep Richie standing upright if he started to fall over.

“Hey, Ben,” Bill called, leaning forward on the bar to look past Mike

who leaned back to get out of his way.

“Yeah?” Ben asked, his hand absently swirling the ice around in his nearly empty glass.

“Did Richie...you know, take something?”

“Uh...” Ben looked to Beverly, then down at his glass and shrugged. “No. I think he did about four shots the minute we hit the bar. And every drink he’s ordered since then has been a double.”

“We need to cut him off for the night or we’ll be carrying him on the train—if they even let him on the train,” Bill said, shaking his head. “He really needs to cool it.”

“It’s Richie,” Ben said, still staring down at his glass. “Drinking’s his thing.” With that, he finished off his own glass and asked to cash out. Bill did the same, then told the bartender he’d pay for Richie’s as well—meaning he’d paid for Mike’s Budweiser, too. Mike didn’t like that.

He didn’t want to be in Bill’s debt as well as Beverly’s and Richie’s.

“Did he drink when you two were out?” Bill asked, looking to Mike who shook his head.

“Just coffee. We got coffee and went to IHOP. They don’t serve alcohol.” Mike looked back over toward the bathroom where Mr. Hanlon and Richie were coming through the doorway. Richie was at least holding himself up this time. Maybe he’d thrown up and gotten some of it out of his system...

“I guess that’s true,” Bill said, then asked the bartender for a round of waters.

“Dude, there’s a bowl of condoms in the bathroom,” Richie said, grinning like a mad man as he dropped down onto his bar stool. As if to prove his point, he handed one to Mike who stared at it a moment in shock and then dropped it as if it had burnt him. “Should keep that,” Richie said, grabbing it and then—for whatever reason—tucking it into the pocket of Mike’s jeans. “Might need it later.”

Mike felt like he could die from the embarrassment.

“Richie, are you trying to scare him off?” Beverly asked, patting the man on the shoulder.

“Is that too strong?” Richie asked, looking to her then looking back at Mike, his grin gone for all of four seconds before he was fixing Mike with the same hungry stare he’d had the night they met.

“For what it’s worth,” Mr. Hanlon interjected, holding up his hands, “I tried to stop him.”

“Yeah, the other guy in there—” Richie choked on his own laughter for a moment, attention snapping away from Mike in an instant. “This other guy in there asked Mikey here why he didn’t want to get laid—is this a gay bar?”

“Yes, Richie,” Beverly said, patting his back.

“How’d you guess?” Ben asked, slapping Richie on the back hard enough that it seemed to hurt. The other man flinched and straightened up a bit in his seat.

“The guy in there, thinking I’m tryna hook up with Mikey,” Richie said, his voice slurred but somewhat serious as he picked up the glass of water that had replaced his tumbler of whiskey. “God, I hope people don’t hear about this,” he said, sending an unexpected bolt of pain through Mike’s chest.

He tried not to let it show on his face, tried to remind himself that it was for the best the media didn’t find out about them—but somehow, it still hurt to hear Richie say it out loud. Especially after he’d stolen that kiss on the mountain while saying he wanted the world to know.

“Jesus, Rich,” Bill said, very nearly glaring at Richie before patting Mike on the shoulder. The touch startled him and he tensed, but tried to hide it by picking up his Budweiser bottle and chugging what was left.

“No, like, the tabloids—I can’t have the tabloids thinking I’m hooking up with Mr. Tall Dark and Handsome!” Richie said, his voice horribly slurred as he gestured to Mr. Hanlon who was shaking his head, looking more annoyed than good humored.

“We should’ve cut him off half an hour ago,” Bill said, burying his face in his hands for a second.

“Can’t have people thinking *Mike’s* my boyfriend when *Mike’s* my boyfriend,” Richie finished, laughing harder than he should have before covering his face with his hands as well and scrubbing at his eyes beneath his glasses. “I want to go home, guys.”

“We should get an Uber to the train station,” Ben said, sounding as exhausted as the rest of them.

Mike, still recovering from the shock of being referred to as Richie’s *boyfriend*, moved his hand to Richie’s thigh and squeezed it gently. In an instant, Richie’s hand was over top his own and was squeezing it in return.

“Boyfriend?” Mike mumbled, gazing at Richie who was outright staring at him while his friends arranged for an Uber.

“Isn’t that what you are?” Richie asked, blinking sluggishly as he shifted his weight on the stool.

“I... I guess,” Mike said answered, trying not to get his hopes up. Richie was drunk. He didn’t know what he was saying.

“You wanna get a hotel?” Richie asked, his brow actually furrowing a bit—as if he were nervous of Mike’s answer. All Mike could do was stammer and blush, realizing that Beverly had tuned into their conversation at the exact wrong moment.

“Richie, you’re going at a ten—I’m going to need you to take it down to, maybe, a six. Okay? Our car’s coming.”

“Shit! I need the check—”

“I already paid your check,” Bill said, getting up from his stool.

“Oh, wow! Really? That’s so nice, dude,” Richie said, getting up from his seat as well—seemingly already having forgotten his want for a hotel room. “Are you tryna hook up with me too?”

“Fuck you, you’re drunk,” Bill said, shaking his head in annoyance.

“Mike, I honestly don’t know how you put up with him. You’ve got more patience than me.”

“Well, he actually likes me,” Richie said, voice slurring almost incomprehensibly as he put an arm around Mike’s shoulders.

By the time they got on the train, Richie seemed on the verge of passing out, and an hour into the ride he was fast asleep with his head on Richie’s shoulder—an image Beverly happily caught with her cell phone and forwarded on to Richie. Mike felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, but Richie remained blissfully unaware.

When they finally, finally made it home, Mike got Richie upstairs to bed. He was a little more alert than he had been before, and sober enough to change clothes and brush his teeth, and plug in his phone to charge before passing out face-down in his bed. Mike showered and went through his evening routine, checking the tablet for messages from Nancy as he shuffled down into the blankets beside Richie. (The condom from the bar which Richie had shoved into his pocket was placed in the nightstand drawer with the open box already there.) Nancy had messaged him asking about his day and he told her a little bit about Palm Springs (though it was like four or something in the morning where she was by the time he was laying down for sleep). He was about to set the tablet aside when another message flashed across the top of the screen from Beverly in the next room.

He opened it to find the photo Beverly had taken of him and Richie on the train as well as few others he hadn’t realized she’d gotten.

“Take good care of him OK? He really likes you.”

Mike sent her a smiley face, because that was as coherent a thought he form as he glanced over at Richie who was still sound asleep—though he’d scooted a little closer.

He didn’t know what Beverly thought he had to offer Richie, but he’d give the man anything he asked. His affection was worthless, but it was there for the taking if Richie wanted it. Staring at the photos of them together, especially one of them on the mountain where Richie had been walking with his arm over Mike’s shoulders still, made him

feel warm—made him feel completed in some way.

He sent the pictures along to Nancy with the briefest of messages afterwards.

“Boyfriend,” and then a heart emoji.

Boyfriend... The very idea made him melt. Mike set the tablet aside on the nightstand and slid his way under one of Richie’s arms, burying his face in the man’s chest.

“S’late,” Richie said, definitely still asleep as he squeezed Mike tightly for a second or two.

“I know,” Mike said, shuffling around little by little until their legs were intertwined.

“Should go to bed,” he slurred. “Sun’s up.”

The sun was definitely not up, but Mike managed not to laugh.

“No, it’s nighttime,” Mike whispered to him, kissing his neck gently and earning a sleepy little hum in return followed by a “goodnight” so slurred it was almost unintelligible. Whatever Richie tried to say after that was garbled and overcome with exhausted sighs. It sounded sweet though, and kind. Mike kissed his neck one last time and then closed his eyes, letting flashes of their day together fill his head as he drifted off to sleep.

Notes for the Chapter:

The most unrealistic thing in this story is the train schedules and I'm not sorry.

Also, Richie was totally trying to say "Goodnight, I love you," in his sleep.

Author's Note:

Thank you for reading! Please feel free to leave a comment and let me know what you think!